

# ETHNIC AND GENDER STEREOTYPES IN THE MEDIA

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## **GLOSSARY**

This chapter reviews the research literature on ethnic and gender stereotypes in the media. We begin with a preliminary discussion of stereotypes, power, and social control. Next, we offer a critical overview of the two main research traditions which are concerned with the study of media stereotypes: content analysis and discourse analysis. Content analysis is concerned with questions of media bias and distortion; predominantly quantitative in its approach, it focuses on the manifest meanings of media messages, and how these meanings tend to exaggerate or minimize specific facts about different social groups. In contrast, discourse-analytic approaches emphasize the latent meanings and connotations embedded within the media message. Predominantly qualitative in its approach, discourse analysis seeks to uncover how the activation of these deeper cultural structures helps to perpetuate and naturalize specific ways of thinking about different groups. While quite different, both of these approaches have produced

important findings about the processes by which ethnic, racial, and gender stereotypes are created and reproduced in the media.<sup>1</sup>

## **I. DEFINING STEREOTYPES AND CONCEPTUALIZING THEIR EFFECTS**

For the purposes of this chapter, we define a stereotype as any representation which carries an undifferentiated depiction of a group. Glossing over the internal differences which exist within the group, stereotypes instead emphasize broad similarities and overarching commonalities, whether real or imagined. By privileging between-group variation over within-group variation, stereotypes tend to reinforce the idea that group identities are natural and primordial. In fact, while the focus of this chapter is on the representation of minority groups, it is important to recognize that all group identities are created and reproduced through the circulation of stereotypes. Linked to basic cognitive processes, stereotypes allow individuals to categorize information and to make stable identifications of specific groups, including one's own. In the absence of stereotypes, group identities would have a much more tenuous existence.

While stereotypes may be situated within a larger process of cognition, categorization, and social description, they also contain an evaluative component which relates them in crucial ways to processes of power and social control. The reason for this is that there is a non-random and unequal distribution of group evaluations. Positive stereotypes are typically reserved for powerful groups, while oppressed and excluded groups more frequently find themselves subjected to negative and pejorative stereotypes. Furthermore, the imbalance in group evaluation is compounded by an imbalance in control, particularly where mass media are concerned. Despite the progress that has been made in recent years, the creation, production, and control of media images remains overwhelmingly in the hands of white men. For women, ethnic minorities,

and other groups who lack control over their media portrayals, it is difficult to correct any inaccurate, insensitive, or damaging stereotypes which confront them; as a result of this imbalance in media evaluation and control, the system of stereotypes tends to naturalize the status quo, producing an ideological effect.

While the system of media stereotypes tends to serve the interests of the most powerful groups in society, the effect of these stereotypes depends on the specific ways that individuals interpret the media products they consume. Indeed, recent findings in audience research point to the fact individuals tend to be quite active in interpreting media messages, filtering them through specific experiences and identities in order to derive meanings which frequently deviate from the creators' intended message. In other words, it is rare for a stereotype to have a direct and powerful effect on an individual. Individuals apply their own biographical and hermeneutic resources to the interpretation of the media text, and therefore have a capacity to resist stereotypes.

It is important not to overstate this argument about interpretive resistance, however; if anything, the distribution of interpretive resistance suggests that media stereotypes still have a powerful ideological effect in many instances. Individuals are more likely to adopt a critical interpretive stance toward those media images which are closer to their own life experiences; on the other hand, when they see media portrayals more distant from their own experiences, they are more likely to treat those representations as realistic depictions of social life. Thus, media stereotypes about race relations tend to have the most powerful effects on those individuals whose life experiences offer little or no opportunity for direct interracial contact. African-Americans tend to be more critical of media portrayals of black life than they are about white representations. Along the same lines, women are more likely than men, for example, to interpret

a music video by Madonna as an image of female power and autonomy. This relationship between experiential affinity and interpretive resistance suggests that, while negative stereotypes may have a weaker effect on the group represented, they are still likely to have considerable effects on others groups, by activating and reinforcing existing prejudices. The distribution of media stereotypes continues to be an important social issue.

## II. GENERAL HISTORICAL TRENDS IN MEDIA STEREOTYPES

In many ways, media images of minority groups have improved dramatically during the last hundred years. This is particularly evident in the case of racial representations. Before the 1920s, films and newspapers openly encouraged an attitude of white superiority which legitimated prejudice, and, on occasion, encouraged violence. The most well known case of this was *Birth of a Nation*, a tremendously successful movie released in 1915. This film, which presented the lynching of African-Americans as a heroic act, helped to bring about the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan and the rise of mob violence against black men. Other films of the early twentieth century, while less successful commercially, portrayed Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asians in an equally crude manner, reinforcing an attitude of white supremacy and open hostility toward minorities in the process.

These kinds of shrill and inflammatory portrayals were found not only in fictional media, but were also present in more “serious” media. The Western stereotype of the exotic and sinister Asian developed in newspapers as early as the 1870s, and was only later reinforced by fictional characters such as Fu Manchu. Press stories about the need to protect white women from marauding black men were popular in Southern newspapers in the 1860s and 1870s, pre-dating by at least forty years one of the main themes of *Birth of a Nation*. Nineteenth century political

cartoons frequently depicted racial and ethnic minorities as animalistic and less than fully human. Many of the alternative media developed during the nineteenth century, in fact, were created as a direct response to “mainstream” press stereotypes of ethnic and racial minorities.

The political regulation and scrutiny of media content increased dramatically after the 1920s, leading film producers and newspaper editors to take more active steps to self-censor the more obvious and inflammatory stereotypes which had been so prevalent in the past. This growing political attention to media content came from several sources. Many conservative Congressmen had grown increasingly suspicious of radio, film, and newspaper content, and took actions to censor what they saw as anti-American, pro-European, and pro-Communist propaganda. While this movement was primarily concerned with eliminating Communist sympathizers from Hollywood, one of its indirect effects was the belief that overtly racist media representations made African-Americans more susceptible to anti-American propaganda. At the other end of the political spectrum, liberal politicians and cultural critics were also fighting against crude and viciously racist portrayals of African-Americans, arguing that these kinds of images were uncomfortably similar to the anti-Jewish propaganda produced by the Nazi regime. By 1950, just as modern communication research was establishing itself in the United States, overt and inflammatory racism had more or less disappeared from “mainstream” media content. As a result, most media research has focused on more normalized forms of stereotyping which continue to circulate in radio, television, newspapers, and film.

### **III. CONTENT ANALYSIS AND THE STUDY OF MEDIA STEREOTYPES**

Historically, research on media stereotypes has tended to emphasize the manifest content of the media message, in order to consider whether this content is exaggerating or minimizing any facts about a group. Typically, this involves the methodology of content analysis, where the researcher identifies a number of descriptive terms, and then counts how many times these terms appear in the media over a given period of time. For example, researchers might count the number of times African-American lawyers and African-American athletes appear in the media, and then compare those frequencies with the “real” occupational distribution of African-Americans. If they found that African-Americans were over-represented in the media as athletes and under-represented as lawyers, they could then point to the existence of a media stereotype.

The most compelling advantage of using content analysis to study media stereotypes is the ability to collect comprehensive data covering a vast quantity of media output. It is useful to know how often news stories about crime and poverty focus on ethnic minorities, how often children’s cartoon characters are women, and how these worlds of media representation compare with social reality. It is also useful to know whether these representations have changed over time. Content analysis allows the researcher to reach definitive answers to these kinds of questions, allowing for the gradual accumulation of scientific knowledge. Indeed, by producing systematic, rigorous, and quantifiable data, content analysis provides a tremendous resource for scholars who want to participate in debates about media policy.

#### **A. Content Analyses of Gender Stereotypes**

Early feminist work in media studies was concerned with exposing the deeply embedded sexist imagery and stereotypes within popular media, and the ways in which these stereotyped

images served to produce distorted rather than realistic depictions of gender roles (Tuchman, Daniels and Benet 1978). These studies found that while the media images were just as stereotypical for men as they were for women, they tended to be distributed in such a way as to contribute to a broad range of social problems, including sexist attitudes and beliefs, sexual harassment, violence against women, eating disorders, and stereotyped perceptions of and behavior toward vulnerable groups of men and women. In particular, images of women were much more likely to draw on negative stereotypes. Recent analyses of gender stereotypes find that not much has changed.

The most basic aspect of gender stereotyping in the media comes from the vast under-representation of women. One study of prime-time promotional announcements broadcast on the five major television networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, and UPN) reports that women are under-represented in all of the networks' promotional announcements (Eaton 1997). Men comprise the majority of total characters shown on television, a fact which has remained relatively constant over time. Indeed, in an examination of the demographic makeup of the new characters added to the prime-time lineup, Bradley Greenberg ("The Changing Faces on TV: A Demographic Analysis of Network Television's New Seasons, 1966-1992", *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 41 (1997), pp. 1-13) found that 65 percent of the new characters were men. The same kinds of disparities exist for other media, such as film, print, and radio, where women are also under-represented.

While women are generally under-represented, when they do appear they tend to be portrayed in roles that trivialize, idealize, sexualize, or narrowly define them. Men, on the other hand, are usually depicted in high status roles in which they dominate women. Few studies have found any movement towards more realistic, nuanced, or diverse media depictions of gender

roles, but stereotypical portrayals of women do vary according to the network's target audience. Specifically, promotional announcements on networks that seek a younger male audience contain more sexualized female characters than network programming produced for a more general audience. In short, misogyny through negative female stereotyping has become a marketing strategy used to foster male consumerism.

One important gender stereotype which circulates in the media is the beauty ideal, which promotes the view that attractive women and men are thin, white, and sexually appealing to the other sex. While this image exists to some extent for both genders, it abounds for women. Sexist media images principally set unrealistic standards of beauty and thinness for women, producing distorted and atypical impressions concerning the female body. Studies of exposure to the media's thin ideal link it to poor self-esteem, fat stereotyping, unrealistic body shape standards, and symptoms of eating disorders. Television viewing correlates with an increased tendency among males to stereotype overweight female characters and to an increased likelihood of eating disorders. While thin characters continue to be judged critically on their levels of attractiveness, average-weight female characters in particular are considered to be unattractive and are viewed negatively. The ideal of extreme thinness leaves little room for diverse representations of body type.

The sexualization of women is another type of gender stereotyping in the media. In music videos, for example, sexualizing stereotypes are overt. Similar to other media, women are under-represented in music videos despite the increasing numbers of female musicians in the music industry. When women are visible, they are portrayed as affectionate, dependent, nurturing, and fearful. They inevitably possess beautiful bodies, wear revealing clothing, become the object of someone else's gaze, and are portrayed as initiating sexual behavior more often than men. To the

contrary, men are over-represented and are typically shown to be adventurous, domineering, violent, aggressive, and adorned with attractive, wanting women. Coupled with fewer representations, gender stereotyping and female sexualization in music videos activate narrowly defined ideals of femininity, construct the female sex object, and “symbolically annihilate” women.

Even children’s programming readily utilizes these types of gender stereotypes. Many studies find that children’s attitudes about gender roles are influenced by the amount of television they watch. A content analysis of children's educational programming indicates that male characters have greater representation than female characters, and both exhibit significant sex-role stereotypical behavior. For example, television commercials featuring only one gender portray boys more often than girls and place them outside the home more frequently. Additionally, voice-overs tend to correspond to the actor's sex when the actor is a boy, but this is not true if the actor is a girl. The subtle and consistent nature of the stereotypical behavior found in many children’s programs helps to naturalize gender-stereotyped views of the world. From this point of view, children who watch the most television are those who also hold the most stereotypic, gender typed values.

## **B. Content Analyses of Ethnic Stereotypes**

Media coverage of ethnic and racial minorities displays many of the content features discussed above for women. First, there is a vast under-representation of non-whites in the media. Only 12 percent of the new prime-time television characters introduced between 1966-1992 were non-white. Only about 15 percent of children’s books published in the United States between 1937-1993 contained any African-American characters. The situation is similar in

fashion magazines, music videos, and newspapers, where the faces in the media are overwhelmingly white. And while there has been some improvement in recent years, the demographic makeup of media images continues to reproduce an inaccurate representation of social reality, despite the proliferation of new media and new cable television channels. This under-representation is just as true for European media as it is in the United States.

When ethnic and racial minorities are represented in the media, they tend to appear in ways which demonize, trivialize, and hypostatize them. Most of these stereotypes circulate in news programming and other “reality based” genres. Political news tends to treat racial and ethnic minorities as uniform voting blocs pursuing special interests, without regard for the public good. News stories about crime and poverty focus disproportionately on African-Americans and Latinos, far exceeding their actual, respective proportions of the poor and the lawbreaking. In fact, as Entman (1994) found in a recent study of television, nearly sixty percent of all network news stories focus on negative news about African-Americans: typically, either as the victims of social misfortune, or as the perpetrators of crime. In contrast, whites are portrayed in a way which makes them appear much wealthier and more educated than they really are, and much more likely to be defenders of the law. This combination of stereotypes – disproportionately positive for whites, and disproportionately negative for nonwhites – creates a comparative context which is particularly damaging to ethnic and racial minorities.

Some of the most interesting and compelling content-analytic studies have focused on the comparative framing of risk between whites and nonwhites. In an examination of news coverage of residential mortgage success for African-Americans and whites, for example, Kent Goshorn and Oscar Gandy (“Race, Risk, and Responsibility: Editorial Constrain in the Framing of Inequality”, *Journal of Communication* 45 (1995), pp. 133-151) found that 75 percent of the

headlines were framed in terms of black loss. In addition, the probability that a newspaper story would emphasize the theme of black loss was significantly related to the proportion of African-Americans living in the newspaper's city; in other words, as the number of African-Americans increased, so did the use of the "black failure" stereotype.

In a larger study of news coverage about inequality and discrimination, Gandy and his associates reported similar findings ("Race and Risk: Factors Affecting the Framing of Stories about Inequality, Discrimination, and Just Plain Bad Luck", *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61 (1997), pp. 158-182). Collecting a sample of more than 1000 articles which contained the word "black" within 10 words of the expressions "more likely" and "less likely", Gandy found that the theme of black loss was present in more than half of the headlines and more than 70 percent of the lead paragraphs; the theme of white advantage, by contrast, was present in only 3.9 percent of the headlines and 10.3 percent of the lead paragraphs. By focusing on black failure rather than white privilege, these news stories worked together to deflect attention away from the issue of discrimination, and toward the implicit theme of personal responsibility. Indeed, the theme of discrimination, which was only present in 11 percent of the stories, was used least often in those cities where the objective living conditions of African-Americans was the worst. These kinds of representations, by combining the stereotype of black failure with the theme of personal responsibility, have the effect of encouraging a "blame the victim" mentality among viewers and readers of the news.

#### **IV. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND MEDIA STEREOTYPES: THE ROLE OF CHARACTER**

While content analysis has proven useful in establishing an overarching sense of the discrepancies between the media representations and social realities of different groups, it has been less successful at measuring how stereotypes can circulate through the latent meanings and connotations embedded within a media text. For scholars influenced by structuralism, this is a serious and problematic oversight, because the literal meaning of a word or image is much less meaningful than its relationship to a deeper cultural system, in which each unit derives its value from its position in a system of similarities and oppositions. There are certain basic structures which regulate how different words and images are related to each other, and thus made meaningful. Uncovering these structures is central to the understanding of how media stereotypes get their power.

The symbolic relationship between the different characters in the story provides one of the most important mechanisms through which media texts activate latent meanings about different social groups. Indeed, the tension between different characters provides the “narrative skeleton” that informs any semiotic process. Because stories require protagonists and antagonists, who are arranged in relations of homology and antipathy to each other -- for example hero and villain, ally and opponent, subject and object, donor and receiver, friend and enemy -- the characters of a narrative serve as embodiments of a society’s deep cultural codes. In many respects, the construal of character is the most important step in dealing with another person, and the part of social interaction which is inherently dramatic. By arranging the characters of a narrative in binary relations to one another, and doing the same thing with the descriptive terms attached to those characters, media representations and other narratives help to

charge social life with evaluative and dramatic intensity at the same time as they encourage specific beliefs about privilege and subordination. The issue of character development, then, is crucial for the study of media stereotypes.

### **A. Gender and Character Development in the Media**

Popular media narratives use language to apportion different character types and descriptions for men and women that reflect and construct unequal power relations. These character types involve syntactic codes and characteristics that mark characters according to social statuses such as gender, race, and class. For every contemporary story that presents women playing strong and intelligent roles, there are numerous others in which women are linguistically marked as 'other,' vilified, victimized, or otherwise narrowly defined. Whereas dominant male characters draw on elaborated syntactic codes, female characters are regularly depicted in stereotypic ways. Most media still portray men as the major characters and cast women as decorative objects, scheming villains, helpless imbeciles, or servants to men.

Linguistic constructions are heavily biased toward dominant groups, particularly toward white heterosexual men. That which represents the culturally dominant form of masculinity, i.e., dominance, stoicism and workplace orientation, is constructed in relation to femininity and subordinated masculinities, such as homosexuality. Character traits depicting hegemonic masculinity, such as strength, aggressiveness, risk, and virility, characterize the universal subject as male. In opposition to this, the feminine is by definition weak, emotional, oriented to the home, conciliatory, fearful, sexualized and objectified. Sports coverage, for example, exploits these gender characterizations by describing the universality of male sport in opposition to the subordinated status of female sport. Male athletes symbolize exemplary masculinity while

female athletes represent a break in feminine norms. The gendered language of televised sports shows how the use of stereotypic language in the media asymmetrically marks men and women by separating the 'men' from the 'girls'. Female athletes are marked as 'other' while their male counterparts personify true athleticism together with male power and privilege. Athletes in the media are placed in a hierarchy in which the male is valued more than the female, placing culturally dominant forms of masculinity and femininity at odds.

The deeply embedded cultural codes that define masculinity and femininity also come to life in the vilification of female characters. Women who do not meet the requirements of emphasized femininity, or who possess traits such as old age, ugliness, or an inability to have a husband or a child, are portrayed as being less than truly feminine. Soap operas, for example, glorify and idealize women who are committed to children and community, nobly characterizing them as nurturing, vulnerable and naïve. In contrast, female characters who do not have children, or are too dedicated to their careers tend to have negative personality traits that seemingly correspond to their unfeminine life choices. When formally playing the role of villain, male and female characters continue to personify stereotypical gender traits. To be a worthy opponent, male villains possess traits that correspond to culturally dominant definitions of exemplary masculinity – aggressiveness, risk, intelligence and dominance. Since the hero of the narrative is almost always a man, female villains must also take on these masculine traits in order to become plausible and worthy adversaries. This gender contradiction requires the female villain to disparage her feminine demeanor by way of trickery, hyper-feminine charm, feigned victimization, or temper tantrums.

Stereotypical narratives involving criminals and victims also create an antagonistic character relationship that is based in gender, and deepened by race and class. Studies of social

control have repeatedly found that stereotypical images of criminals and victims exacerbate women's fear of crime. Common narrative themes include images of criminals as poor minority men and evil strangers who randomly attack their victims. On the other hand, images of victims are predominantly those of white middle-class women, who are innocent, submissive, and unable to protect themselves. Even cartoon characters reinforce these representations of women as the more likely victims of antisocial acts. Images such as these intensify stereotypical images of male supremacy and female powerlessness such that even brief exposure to stereotypical images can influence gender role expectations and lead to differences in how men and women process visual imagery in the media.

Gender is a defining factor which helps to determine how different characters are positioned within a narrative. Steeped in images of exemplary masculinity and emphasized femininity, male and female characters conform to predetermined expectations and attitudes, and it is very difficult for either men or women to break from the gender convention. With fewer representations to choose from, female characters are most profoundly tied to stereotypic roles and characteristics. By giving these controlling images truth status, readers idealize dominant definitions of masculinity and femininity by associating them with antagonistic character relations and the traits attached to them. However, individuals primed with counter-stereotypic representations as opposed to stereotypic ones, tend to afford women a greater range of roles and character traits, and view women more credibly and responsibly. These findings support claims that the popular media has the potential to use language, character types, and descriptions of men and women to promote social equality, rather than simply the re-inscription of dominant power relations.

## **B. Ethnicity, Race, and Character Development in the Media**

A vast literature exists which documents the dependent, degrading, and demeaning character positions which racial and ethnic minorities were restricted to in the early history of television and film. There were two main types of characters which predominated during this early history. One kind, shown in films such as *Birth of a Nation*, *The Greaser's Revenge*, *The Yellow Menace*, and *The Son of the Sheik* presented images of dangerous and deranged minorities, who could only be controlled through violent and vicious coercion. The other type of character, found in films such as *Only Angels Have Wings* and radio/television programs such as *Amos 'n' Andy*, showed minorities as funny, stupid, and relatively harmless. By limiting minority characters to these two narrative functions – comic relief, or dangerous threat – mass media guaranteed that the world of heroic action would be restricted to white men.

While the most glaring, offensive, and blatantly racist cases have been eliminated to a large extent, racial and ethnic minorities still tend to be limited to subordinate and dependent character positions in media narratives. Similar to the manifest media messages studied by content analysis, most contemporary character stereotypes now circulate in news programming and other “reality-based” genres. For example, news coverage of inter-ethnic interaction is almost always framed in terms of conflict, where the two groups are portrayed as being unable to regulate themselves, and are therefore dependent on an outside (and usually white) mediator. In general, news coverage of minorities almost always refers to them as a problem population, where the character of problem-solver is typically reserved for members of the ethnic majority group. Frequently, these stories are narrated as an epic struggle for social order and civilization, where the villains are law-breaking ethnic gangs and the heroes are white policemen. This type of character development – minority group as problem-maker, and majority group as problem-

solver – denies autonomy and voice to ethnic and racial minorities. And the consequences of these forms of character development can be found at the level of manifest content, in the facts that that minority groups get quoted in the news less often, less extensively, and less directly than whites.

In an examination of media coverage of racial crisis, Ronald Jacobs (*Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society: From Watts to Rodney King*. Cambridge University Press, 2000) showed how the identification of specific subject positions prevented African-Americans from being portrayed as powerful or autonomous. During the 1965 Watts uprising, the rioters were described as irrational and hysterical in the “mainstream” news media, while the leaders of the African-American community were either described as ineffective or as the dependent dupes of Communist propagandists. In the aftermath of the 1991 Rodney King beating, African-Americans were portrayed almost exclusively as victims of police brutality, while the more active and potentially heroic character positions were reserved for the (mostly white) political leaders of city, state, and federal government. After the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, “mainstream” news narratives blamed the failure of political elites to resolve the structural problems of race and urban life; African-Americans were again restricted to mostly passive character positions, as the victims of forces well beyond their control. Throughout all of these crises, the black press was virtually the only media source in which one could find heroic character positions reserved for African-Americans. For “mainstream” media audiences, however, the development of majority and minority character positions reinforced the idea that the space of potential political heroism was almost entirely absent of racial and ethnic minorities.

## **V. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND MEDIA STEREOTYPES: THE ROLE OF GENRE**

In addition to examining the character oppositions through which media stereotypes are constructed, discourse-analytic studies also consider the types of stories that are used to describe different groups. The identification of story type is related to the organization of different media texts into specific genres, which structure the audience's expectations about how the story will develop. While most empirical narratives will cross the boundaries of any single analytical genre, there are nevertheless patterned consistencies in the movement of certain types of stories through narrative time and space, creating a set of expectations or family resemblances shared by audiences and producers alike. Audiences can clearly recognize the difference between news and entertainment, between romance and tragedy, between epic and melodrama. The media industry takes advantage of these patterned consistencies in the selection, creation, differentiation, and marketing of its products, establishing clear conventions for distinguishing between story types and for placing them into hierarchies of greater and lesser importance. By attaching greater significance to some kinds of media content while trivializing others, the hierarchy of media genres provides another mechanism for naturalizing stereotypes.

### **A. Genre and Gender Stereotypes**

Men and women are distributed across the spectrum of media genres in such a way as to reinforce and naturalize gender stereotypes. Representations of women are consistently concentrated in entertainment and melodramatic genres. Although white men are the most dominant group on television, entertainment genres which are of lower prestige and thought to be the most trivial and benign, over-represent women, particularly low-status women. Additionally, the most typical genre for "women's programming" is melodrama, which also

happens to be the most degraded and devalued of all the genres. More elevated genres, such as the news or the epic, have proven much less successful as cultural forms for narrating women's lives in the media.

The fact that women are found primarily in comedies, while men are typically in story types with greater esteem, tells us something about the social order. Humor can be used to indirectly express and negotiate the emotions and tensions of everyday life. Or, it can serve to trivialize these tensions. Women's over-representation in situation comedies particularly gives the impression that men are to be taken seriously and women are not. Race interacts with gender when black women are portrayed in stereotypical roles such as maids, comics, or support staff. Often shown to be more dominant than White women, African-American women are cast as humorous but dominating characters, reproducing racist stereotypes of the mythical Black matriarch. These narrow caricatures of human beings are laughed away in the comedic setting, where the movement of the story is ultimately toward one of integration.

Melodrama easily conforms to dominant gender ideology, focusing on women and their place in the social world. The emotional excess characteristic of melodrama exaggerates the chaos and unpredictability of modern life, while stereotypically focusing on the family and gender roles. The primary themes of melodrama glorify and idealize the non-employed woman who is committed to children, condemn women who are too dedicated to their careers, and exaggerate women's participation in the professions. Even programs within this genre that feature strong women tend to give an unrealistic view of their lives by concentrating on an idealized family life and showing no real intersection of professional and personal life.

Women's lack of representation in certain reality-based genres such as the news is an unambiguous example of women's place in the social order. Despite the high visibility of a few

prominent women reporters and analysts, women are not considered to be experts when it comes to the seriousness of the news. Men provide 85 percent of quotes or references, 75 percent of those interviewed on television, and 90 percent of the most recently cited authorities, even when the issues at hand directly involve women. When it comes to those who report the news, women are also in the minority, representing 15 percent of network news reporters, and 20 percent of print journalists, although they are 68 percent of journalism school graduates. In news coverage, women are stereotypically represented in terms of their capacity as mothers, nurturers of the community, or the helpless victims of domestic violence. The news genre invokes stereotypes of women's diminished intellectual capacity, femininity, passivity and dependence on men.

The epic genre tends to acquire its social authority by preserving hegemonic social and cultural norms. Corresponding to cultural ideals of hegemonic masculinity, an analysis of the *Batman* epic as portrayed on television, movies, and comic books reveals an underlying ideology that links male violence to punishment and justice. By attaching this ideology to the ancient imagery of good against evil, Batman typifies the essentialism of American masculinity and American justice as a necessary cultural identity that supports a vital institution. In contrast, *The Avengers* failed as epic, because the story line did not correspond to the dominant ideology and cultural identity. Traced to the popular culture of 1960s and the general revolution of gender identity, the program depicted an erosion of patriarchy, an increase in female employment, and a new sexual liberation. Yet, this elevated genre of women's lives was too much at odds with American culture and the audience for American media; the failure of the program demonstrated how the hierarchy of media genres relates in important ways to the reproduction of male privilege.

## **B. Genre and Ethnic-Racial Stereotypes**

The hierarchy of media genres also serves to reproduce and to naturalize racial and ethnic stereotypes. Again, like the other forms of stereotyping for racial and ethnic groups, most of the activity appears to occur in news programming and other “reality-based” genres. In the news, there is a patterned distribution of representations which reinforces negative or trivializing images about racial and ethnic minorities. In the most important sub-genres which tend to occupy the lead stories of television news broadcasts and the front pages of newspapers, minority groups find themselves represented as the helpless victims of poverty or the dangerous perpetrators of crime. Stories which represent minority groups in a more positive and active way tend to be concentrated in the less valued and less important sub-genres of the news, such as sports news, entertainment news, and human interest stories. Indeed, when news stories about a minority group move from the human interest and entertainment sub-genres to the more important “hard news” sub-genres, they tend to get increasingly negative. This type of distribution across the different news sub-genres reinforces and naturalizes the idea that the themes of threat and dependence are the most serious and important ways to think about racial and ethnic minorities.

Whereas the distribution of news sub-genres naturalizes the images of minority threat and misfortune, the intertextual relationship between news and entertainment reinforces the “blame the victim” mentality found in so many media texts. In a series of path-breaking studies of the *Cosby Show*, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis (*Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Racism, and the Myth of the American Dream*. Westview Press, 1992) and Herman Gray (“Television Black Americans, and the American Dream”, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989), pp. 376-386) argued that television combines a fictional portrayal of upper-middle class black life

with news portrayals of black crime in the ghetto to produce an image of self-responsibility which is more palatable for a racist culture. On the one hand, the images of success and moral responsibility found in the *Cosby Show* encouraged white audiences to believe that racial barriers were coming down, and that it was possible to have a wealthy, well-adjusted, professional, educated, and African-American family living next door. On the other hand, when these images were combined with the news stories about minority crime and poverty, they sent the implicit message that ghetto residents were responsible for their own misery, for not being like Cliff or Claire Huxtable. What both kinds of stories shared was a privileging of individual attributes and middle-class values; what they both hid were the social and historical factors which shaped these very different kinds of lives.

The genres of sports programming provide another important form of “enlightened racism”. On the one hand, stories about African-American sporting heroes allow white audiences to admire the achievements of black men such as Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, or Michael Johnson. Yet, just like the images found in the *Cosby Show*, the attention paid to these sporting heroes resulted in a distorted and unrealistic image of black success. The biographies of African-Americans sports stars typically emphasize hard work, perseverance, and physical talent as the way out of the poverty and desperation of the urban ghetto. Unfortunately, by emphasizing the theme of heroic individual action, these biographies ignore the structural impediments which African-American men face, particularly those living in the urban core. By emphasizing physical talent over intellectual achievement, they provide a distorted image of the most likely route to success. And combined with the crime stories found on the evening news, these biographies encourage the same “blame the victim” themes which circulate in so many of the other media genres.

Similarly, women's heightened visibility in some media can distort images of female success and shift attention from continued sexism and women's overall disempowerment. For example, the modern prime time drama *Aly McBeal* emphasizes women's success through participation in the high status male dominated field of law. Yet, the female characters are portrayed in terms of emphasized femininity: the beauty ideal, extreme emotionality, and dependence on romance in efforts to glean a share of male privilege. Likewise, when women are depicted as powerful, power is defined in masculine terms of aggression, strength and competition. James Cameron's *Dark Angel* is a typical example. The childlike woman dressed in black subverts the limitations of her gender through super human physical strength, agility, and fighting skill. To justify the embodiment of these masculine traits in the female character, her childlike yet sexualized body is not threatening, but vulnerable and pleasing to a heterosexual male audience. Her powerless demeanor is imbued with a hidden strength and power that defines her as a worthy opponent, capable of asserting herself and resisting victimization. By this rationale, the sexualization and male violence against women becomes a personal issue that also supports the "blame the victim" mentality prevalent in depictions of women and racial ethnic minority groups throughout the media.

Other generic strategies are also used to block a deeper consideration of historical context or effective collective action, in news stories as well as entertainment programming. News stories about inner-city life frequently combine genre strategies from melodrama and the human interest story, where a single personal story stands in for and replaces aggregate social statistics as well as deeper historical context, and where the drama of personal life crowds out those elements of social cohesiveness which actually do exist in the individual's community. In entertainment programming, comedy and melodrama are frequently combined with other genres

(e.g., the hard-boiled detective film) to allow an African-American hero express anger and resistance, while still confining this resistance within a discourse of individualism and personal friendship. And in the rare instances where historical accounts are provided to explain social deprivation in minority communities, they tend to be narrated through the genre of tragedy, in a way which encourages the audience to adopt an attitude of resigned acceptance and passivity instead of collective mobilization. Taken together, this distribution and combination of genres helps to naturalize racial and ethnic stereotypes, by embedding them within the very structure of narration.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Clearly, there are many instances of ethnic and gender stereotyping which continue to operate today, limiting the media's role in promoting tolerance, solidarity, understanding, and respect. Communication researchers continue to invest a great deal of energy identifying these stereotyping mechanisms, adding to the gradual accumulation of knowledge in what has become a well-defined area of scholarship. Women and ethnic minorities continue to be under-represented in the media, and continue to be restricted to devalued character positions and devalued media genres and sub-genres. For women, the majority of stereotypes operate in entertainment programming, in a way that contributes to the reproduction of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity. For racial and ethnic minorities, stereotyping has moved increasingly to news programming and other "reality-based" genres, in a manner which identifies these minority groups as dangerous threats and incompetent unfortunates, all the while encouraging a "blame the victim" mentality among the media audience. In combination, these stereotypes reinforce the

idea that the world of heroic action is composed entirely of white men. They also encourage a sense of cynicism and skepticism about the media from minority audiences.

These stereotypes do not go unchallenged, of course. Social movements and other civic groups continue to organize activities designed to challenge the media's representations of women and ethnic minorities. Alternative media perform a similar watchdog function for their readers, monitoring the "mainstream" media and criticizing its performance. Journalists, writers, and directors attempt to produce media content which deviates from the standard conventions and attempts to circulate new, updated images of minority groups. Nevertheless, the dominant patterns of media stereotyping continue, helping to contribute to the social and cultural privileges enjoyed by white men. For this reason, research on media stereotypes is likely to continue to thrive in the foreseeable future, and the progressive civic potential of mass media is likely to remain unrealized.

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<sup>1</sup> Many social scientists distinguish between racial and ethnic groups. In the typical definitions, ethnic groups are composed of those who share a common culture and/or ancestry, whereas racial groups consist of people who share genetically inherited traits. In the popular culture, however, minority groups tend to be treated as biological categories, regardless of whether they are racially or ethnically defined; this is particularly true for ethnic groups which are defined as non-white (Waters 1990). Not surprisingly, then, media stereotypes operate similarly for racial and ethnic minorities, and the research on media stereotypes does not distinguish in any significant way between racial and ethnic stereotypes. As a result, our discussion of media stereotyping treats ethnic and racial minorities together.