

HOW CHILDREN ARE PROTRAYED IN THE MEDIA

How Children are Portrayed in the Media
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Introduction

Research by Katharine Heintz-Knowles (2004) has indicated that by the time a child graduates from high school, he or she will have spent more time in front of a television set than in a classroom. Children often look to television as a reflection of themselves. A growing body of research indicates that White characters are more likely to be portrayed as crime victims than are African Americans who are more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators and lawbreakers. Latinos are largely absent from TV, including the news (Dixon, 2003). Also, Katharine Heintz-Knowles (2004) indicated that anti-social behaviors such as lying and violence often achieve positive results for child television characters.

Dr. Alvin Poussaint, an African American Professor at Harvard, observed that television gives more negative attributes to minorities and more positive attributes to whites. Also, children often associate positive qualities (academic, financial success, leadership, and intelligence) with White characters and negative qualities (goofy behavior, law breaking, financial hardships) with Non-White characters. (Maddela, 1998)

Our hypothesis is that children are portrayed on television inaccurately in terms of linguistic and cognitive abilities. Further, economic and social variables are not realistic. One possible example of this misrepresentation of Non-White characters is embodied in *The Cosby Show*. Although the show emphasized a strong nuclear family, fiscal responsibility, education, multi-generational family, multi-racial friends, and low-key racial pride, The Museum of Broadcast Communications (2004) pointed out that this series is described by "TV Guide" as "the most atypical black family in television history".

Method

We began conducting our research by analyzing the child characters portrayed in four different one half-hour television comedies. We compared the child characters on the basis of sex, race, and age. Comparisons were based on the economic status of the child's family, the sophistication of the child's verbalization, socialization, and apparent cognitive abilities.

We randomly chose three episodes each of *The Cosby Show*, *Full House*, *That's So Raven*, and *Lizzie McGuire*. The characters we focused our observations on were; Rudy Huxtable from *The Cosby Show*, Michelle Tanner from *Full House*, Cory Baxter from *That's So Raven*, and Matt McGuire from *Lizzie McGuire*. We also compared each character attempting to control the race sex or age and making the comparison based on the race, sex, or age of each child character.

Results

Our results indicated that the media portrays children of color as developmentally advanced beyond their years. Of the four characters included in our study, three of them (Michelle Tanner, Cory Baxter, Matt McGuire) were portrayed inappropriately for their age. Rudy Huxtable, an African American child, was the only character in our study that was depicted accurately in her social, linguistic, and cognitive development. This could be resulted from the fact that there was a consulting

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psychiatrist on set during the filming of The Cosby Show and from the personal influences of Bill Cosby who holds a doctorate in education.

The results of our research contradict previous research (Heintz-Knowles, 1996) in that characters using deceitful or aggressive behavior were generally punished.

Discussion

Our study included a limited number of observations because our goal of matching by race, sex, age, and socioeconomic status (SES) indicated that children in general, may be inappropriately portrayed on television. Families of color appear to be portrayed of higher SES despite the reality of American Society.

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Abstract

This study analyzes and compares the accuracy of the television portrayal of 4 child characters matched on the age, sex and race. Our results indicated that children in general may be inappropriately portrayed on TV. Families of color appear to be portrayed as of higher SES despite the reality of American society. Other variables (i.e. cognitive and linguistic abilities) did not show as consistent a pattern.

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