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The Effects of Interracial Contact, Attitudes, and Stereotypical Portrayals on Evaluations of Black Television Sitcom Characters

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With a sample of White participants, the present study examined the influence of stereotypical TV portrayals, attitudes toward Blacks, and interracial contact on appraisals of Black television sitcom characters. Results suggest that when confronted with stereotypical media content, prior intergroup contact and attitudes toward Blacks interact in influencing evaluations of Black television characters. These findings lend support to the growing body of research identifying the media's ability to activate social stereotypes, while also extending this work to considerations of viewer characteristics that may moderate media effects.

The media have long been criticized for the unfavorable nature of Black representations on television. Although the quantity of these images has improved, characterizations vary dramatically by genre, maintaining doubts as to their overall quality (Children Now, 2002; Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002). As a result, media scholars and advocacy groups alike have repeatedly raised concerns regarding the impact of such portrayals on audience members (Daniels, 2000). Indeed, the research on media priming lends credence to these misgivings. Findings plainly indicate that exposure to negative racial imagery in the media adversely impacts subsequent evaluations of minorities (Ford, 1997; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Johnson, Adams, Hall, & Ashburn, 1997; Pan & Kosicki, 1996; Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 1996; Power, Murphy, & Coover, 1996; Rada, 2000), while under certain conditions positive exemplars improve later judgments (Bodenhausen, Schwarz, Bless, & Wanke, 1995). Yet, although research increasingly has been aimed at exploring the outcomes of exposure, little attention in recent years has been focused on understanding audience members' judgments about these messages and the intergroup factors influencing these evaluations. When considering

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that such appraisals may moderate media effects (Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001), they become of exceptional import. As such, the present study investigates multiple factors influencing appraisals of media content by assessing the impact of stereotypical representations, prejudicial attitudes towards Blacks, and interracial contact on the evaluation of Black characters in TV sitcoms.

Prejudicial Attitudes

Early research on the effects of stereotypical portrayals of Black Americans on television revealed the selective influence of TV in reinforcing preexisting negative stereotypes (Surlin, 1974; Tate & Surlin, 1976a; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). These studies noted that while level of viewing enjoyment was equivalent, individuals asserting greater levels of prejudice accepted specific depictions of racism on television while those reporting less prejudice condemned these same portrayals. More recent studies report similar findings. Negative, stereotypic depictions were found to reinforce adherence to the unfavorable stereotype among those who subscribe to the belief (Brown & Cody, 1991). These trends are in line with research reporting that high versus low prejudicial individuals vary in their willingness to generalize characteristics to an entire group (Devine, 1989), and that individuals high in prejudice also are more inclined to respond in relation to societal standards than those low in prejudice (Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991).

Moreover, because this willingness to express prejudicial responses is related to perceptions of group consensus (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brian, 2002; Fiske, 1998), granting airtime to stereotypical characterizations or themes may be perceived to be an endorsement of these attitudes. Thus, primetime programming depicting prejudicial content may provide the impression that it is a shared, normative belief, leaving more prejudicial viewers to feel unencumbered in expressing their views. Effectively then, exposure to this variety of television programming may serve to sanction prejudice, subsequently influencing evaluations of content.

Interracial Contact

Alongside this research examining the role of prejudice in responses to media content, a small but growing number of studies also have explored how intergroup contact may affect interpretations of the media. Studies examining the effects of stereotypical depictions of race on Whites' racial attitudes have found media effects to be stronger among individuals with less interracial contact (Armstrong, Neuendorf, & Brentar, 1992; Fujioka, 1999). This is consistent with research examining real-world contact between members of different ethnic/racial groups, which suggests that contact may allow for the discovery of similarities between the groups, and thus lessen the tendency to unfavorably stereotype (Masson & Verkuyten, 1993). A recent meta-analytic review of the contact literature also indicates that greater levels of intergroup contact are generally associated with decreases in prejudice, along with a variety of other positive intergroup outcomes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). It is important to note that the nature of the contact is critical. Rather than depending merely on the number of outgroup contacts, research suggests that contact is most effective in promoting positive intergroup outcomes when it involves close, intimate ties with outgroup members, such as in the form of cross-group friendships (McLaughlin-Volpe, Aron, Wright, & Reis, 2000;

Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).

Given these research findings, one might expect both audience members' levels of prejudice and their relationships with outgroup members to influence their responses to stereotypical portrayals of outgroup members in the media. However, the established relationship between contact and prejudice calls into question whether these effects are independent, such that each would uniquely affect audience responses to stereotypical portrayals. What should also be considered is whether interracial contact and prejudice interact, depending on whether audience members are responding to stereotypical or non-stereotypical portrayals. While it might be expected that closer contact with outgroup members and less prejudicial attitudes would be associated with more positive evaluations of Black characters, it is conceivable that stereotypical characterizations of Blacks could lead highly prejudicial audience members to perceive their prejudicial attitudes as being consensually supported, and bolstered by this belief, lead to less favorable evaluations of Black characters irrespective of contact. To our knowledge, no studies have simultaneously assessed the influence of intergroup contact and prejudice on judgments of stereotypical media messages. Thus, the present study is aimed at providing preliminary insights into these issues through investigating the roles of both interracial contact and prejudice on audience members' responses to stereotypical portrayals of Black Americans on television.

Stereotypes in Sitcoms

In assessing the conditions under which contact and prejudice influence the appeal of media characterizations, situation comedies provide a unique vantage point both for their content and composition. Sitcoms provide the least diversified repertoire of characters and remain the only genre with series' featuring all Black casts (Children Now, 2002). Furthermore, content analyses of primetime programming have consistently revealed that depictions of Blacks are largely confined to situation comedies (Children Now, 2002; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Weigel, Kim, & Frost, 1995).

This is notable in that often at the base of TV sitcoms is the use of hostile exchanges to elicit humor (Zillmann & Bryant, 1991). According to disposition theories of humor, enjoyment of this variety of comedy is rooted in audience member's need to enhance feelings about self (Zillmann, 1983). Observing sitcoms allows for this by providing interactions between individuals or groups that often place one person (or group) at a disadvantage, thereby benefiting the other. The appeal is then derived from the dominance of one group over another, with enjoyment increasing when a well-liked character disparages a disliked character.

Under these conditions, character development is unimportant. Situation comedies can simply rely on stereotypes to elicit humor by drawing upon existing affective dispositions (Zillmann & Bryant, 1991). The fundamental requirement for success is merely that viewers not be indifferent to the characters. Of course, not all sitcoms lack character development or solely rely on stereotype-based humor, however, hostile exchanges are certainly not an unfamiliar feature for this genre. Consequently, understanding the impact of this type of content on television becomes critical as it may serve to reinforce its social acceptability in deriding marginalized groups (Bill & Naus, 1992; Ford, 2000; Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001). Although research examining the social consequences of exposure to such content has resulted in antithetical conclusions (Olson, Maio, &

Hobden, 1999), this suggests that the individual factors leading to differing evaluations require increased scrutiny.

The Present Study

This study explores these issues by simultaneously examining the effects of stereotypical media content, prior intergroup attitudes, and prior intergroup contact on evaluations of Black television sitcom characters, using a 2 (media content: stereotypical/non-stereotypical) \times 2 (prejudice: high/low) \times 2 (contact: close/not close) factorial design. In this investigation, current television programming is utilized (rather than vignettes, see Ford et al., 2001) to provide a more externally valid test of audience members' evaluations of Black characters and the extent to which stereotypical media portrayals encourage reliance on prejudice in these evaluations.

Specifically, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

- H1:** A main effect for video condition will impact on evaluations of Black sitcom characters such that those in the stereotype condition will report less favorable evaluations of Black characters than those in the non-stereotype condition.
- H2:** A main effect for prejudice will impact on evaluations of Black sitcom characters such that those high in prejudice will report less favorable evaluations of Black characters than those low in prejudice.
- H3:** A main effect for contact will impact on evaluations of Black sitcom characters such that those with closer cross-group friendships will report more favorable evaluations of Black characters than those whose cross-group friendships are less close.

In addition to testing these hypotheses, the present study also will explore whether the effects of stereotypical portrayals, prejudice, and contact are independent, or whether they interact in predicting audience members' evaluations of Black sitcom characters.

METHOD

The experiment was conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of a voluntary pretest questionnaire distributed to college students from a mid-sized, eastern university. The second phase commenced approximately three weeks later, where students were asked to view and respond to a video clip, ostensibly as part of an unrelated experimental testing session.

Pretest Questionnaire

The pretest questionnaire was designed to identify White participants and to assess their prior experiences with Black Americans and levels of intergroup prejudice. The questionnaire was administered in a large classroom setting, and participants were informed that the researchers were interested in their experiences with and impressions of members of different racial and ethnic groups. Measures of prior intergroup experiences, intergroup prejudice, and motivations to control prejudice were included in the pretest questionnaire.

Intergroup prejudice. Responses to items from the Katz and Hass (1988) Anti-Black

racial attitudes scale were entered into a principal components analysis (varimax rotation) and the eight items that achieved factor loadings of greater than 0.50 were retained for our measure of intergroup prejudice. Item responses were scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Responses were reverse-coded as necessary, so that higher scores indicated more prejudiced attitudes toward Blacks across all items ($\alpha = .82$).

Closeness to outgroup members. Since the contact literature has increasingly emphasized the important role of close, affective ties across group boundaries (McLaughlin-Volpe et al., 2000; Pettigrew, 1997), an indicator of intergroup closeness was used as the primary measure of intergroup contact. Specifically, participants were asked to state how close they feel to the one Black person with whom they have had the closest relationship, with item responses ranging from 1 (not close at all) to 7 (very close).

Motivations to control prejudice. Additionally, because the present study concerns prejudicial attitudes toward Blacks and reactions to stereotypical media content, 10 items to assess participants' motivations to control prejudice were included in the pre-test questionnaire (see Dunton & Fazio, 1997). Items were scored from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Six of the items assessed internal motivation to control prejudice ($\alpha = .84$), involving participants' own standards for being non-prejudicial. These included statements such as, "I get angry with myself when I have a thought or feeling that might be considered prejudiced." The remaining four items assessed external motivation to control prejudice ($\alpha = .84$), or participants' concerns about appearing prejudicial in the eyes of others. These items included statements such as, "I try to hide any negative thoughts I have about Black people in order to avoid negative reactions from others." These measures were used as controls in data analysis, as participants' responses to questionnaire measures may be biased by their motivations to appear non-prejudicial to themselves and others.

Sample and Experimental Procedures

Because the primary focus of this study was on White participants' responses to stereotypical portrayals of Black Americans, only responses from White participants were included in the analysis. Altogether, 194 White participants (67 males, 125 females, 2 unanswered) took part in the experimental portion of the study.

Different experimenters conducted each phase of the study to maintain their seemingly unrelated status. The experimental testing session was conducted in a controlled lab setting. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, containing a maximum of four students per session. Researchers informed the participants that the purpose of this study was to examine people's experiences with and views of racial/ethnic and gender groups, both in their daily lives and on television.

Two television clips were created by the researchers on this project for use as experimental stimuli. These segments were edited from two episodes of the same, currently airing, primetime, all Black sitcom, and were designed to vary only in level of stereotypicality. Using the same sitcom in the creation of both video segments allowed for greater control in maintaining parallel casts of characters across the two segments. Thus, with respect to the viewer's enjoyment and the specific characters depicted, the videos were otherwise designed to be equivalent.

One of two video clips was then played for each session. In the stereotype condi-

tion, participants viewed a 12-minute excerpt of an episode wherein the storyline revolved around the dating and sexual relationships of the main Black, female character. Focus groups conducted prior to the start of the study to identify stereotypes associated with different racial/ethnic groups revealed sexuality/sexual provocativeness to be a commonly identified stereotype appropriate for use in this study. By contrast, in the non-stereotype condition, participants were exposed to a 14-minute excerpt from a different episode of the same television sitcom, in which the same main character harmoniously participated with her peers in an extracurricular activity at her college.

Immediately following exposure, a brief questionnaire was administered to participants to evaluate their enjoyment of the clip and their judgments of the characters and content depicted. Participation in this portion of the study averaged 30 minutes. Once all students had completed their participation, they were fully debriefed as to the nature of the two-part study. Specifically, participants were told that both their responses to the pretest questionnaire and those from the experimental session would be used in data analysis, and that the purpose of the study was to evaluate the effects of interracial contact and prejudice on responses to stereotypical characterizations on television.

Using student identification numbers, questionnaire responses from the pretest and the experimental session were matched. Once these were linked, the identification numbers were deleted from all data so that no identifying information could link students' names to their responses.

Manipulation checks. As part of the questionnaire following the video clip, a single item asked participants to state the extent to which respondents believed the portrayals in the clip to be stereotypical of Blacks, on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all stereotypical) to 7 (very stereotypical). In a single item, participants also were asked to indicate how much they enjoyed watching the clip, with responses ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

Evaluations of Black characters. In a semantic-differential format, participants then responded to six items regarding their impressions of the Black characters in the video clip. Three of these items were designed to assess perceptions of competence (i.e., smart/dumb, intelligent/unintelligent, educated/ignorant) and three pertained to social relations (i.e., nice/mean, respectful/disrespectful, kind/cruel). Principal components analysis revealed that all six of these items loaded onto only one factor, with rotated factor loadings of .79 or higher. Thus, responses to all six items were incorporated into a single measure ($\alpha = .90$), with higher scores indicating a more positive evaluation of the Black characters in the clip.

RESULTS

Preliminary t-tests revealed that participants in the stereotype condition ($M=5.89$) found the clip to be significantly more stereotypical than those in the non-stereotype condition ($M=5.12$), $t = 3.55$, $df = 192$, $p < .001$. At the same time, participants in the stereotype and non-stereotype conditions did not differ in the degree to which they reported enjoying the clip ($M = 3.26$ and 3.53 , respectively), $t = -1.09$, $df = 192$, $p = .275$.

Median splits were used to distinguish between participants high and low in intergroup prejudice and closeness to outgroup members. Specifically, 97 participants with prejudice scores lower than or equal to 5.13 were classified as low-prejudice participants ($M=4.31$), while the remaining 97 participants with prejudice scores higher than

5.13 were classified as high-prejudice participants ($M=5.93$). The t -tests revealed these groups to differ significantly, $t=-18.83$, $df=192$, $p<.01$. Additionally, 90 participants with scores higher than 4.0 on the contact measure were classified as having close contact with outgroup members ($M=5.97$), while 94 participants with scores lower than or equal to 4.0 were classified as not having close contact with outgroup members ($M=2.54$). These groups were significantly different by t -tests, $t=-23.92$, $df=182$, $p<.01$.

Participants' evaluations of Black characters were then examined in a 2 (media content: stereotypical/non-stereotypical) \times 2 (prejudice: high/low) \times 2 (contact: close/not close) between-subjects analysis of variance. A parallel analysis of covariance was also conducted, with internal and external motivations to control prejudice entered as covariates, and results of this analysis were virtually identical to those obtained in the first analysis. Thus, to simplify the presentation of the results, only findings from the original 2 \times 2 \times 2 analysis of variance will be reported. Means and standard deviations for evaluations of Black characters across the conditions are provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1
ANOVA Descriptive Statistics for Evaluations of Black Characters

Stereotype Condition	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Low Prejudice			
Not close to outgroup members	21	3.13	0.74
Close to outgroup members	23	3.91	1.06
High Prejudice			
Not close to outgroup members	18	2.97	0.52
Close to outgroup members	22	2.77	0.82
Non-Stereotype Condition	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Low Prejudice			
Not close to outgroup members	23	4.99	1.24
Close to outgroup members	25	5.15	0.89
High Prejudice			
Not close to outgroup members	32	4.34	1.02
Close to outgroup members	20	5.06	1.09

A significant main effect for media content emerged $F(1, 176)=139.20$, $\eta^2=.44$, $p<.01$. Overall, Black characters were rated less positively in the stereotype condition ($M=3.21$) than in the non-stereotype condition ($M=4.84$). Additionally, a main effect for prejudice was found $F(1, 176)=12.48$, $\eta^2=.07$, $p<.01$. Those with more prejudicial attitudes tended to rate Black characters less positively ($M=3.85$) than those with less prejudicial attitudes ($M=4.34$). The main effect for contact was also significant, $F(1, 176)=6.38$, $\eta^2=.04$, $p<.025$, such that participants with closer ties to outgroup members ($M=4.23$) reported more positive evaluations of Black characters than those without close ties to outgroup members ($M=3.97$).

At the same time, these main effects were qualified by a significant 3-way interaction involving media content, prejudice, and intergroup contact $F(1, 176)=7.21$, $\eta^2=.04$, $p<.01$. Simple effects tests revealed a significant interaction between prejudice and contact in the stereotype condition $F(1,80)=7.48$, $p=.01$, while this interaction was not significant in the non-stereotype condition $F(1,96)=1.65$, $p=.20$. In the non-stereotype condition, only the main effect of contact was significant, $F(1,96)=4.14$, $p<.05$, such that

closer contact with outgroup members was associated with more positive evaluations of Black characters. However, in the stereotype condition different relationships between contact and evaluations emerged among those high and low in prejudice. Among participants low in prejudice, closer contact with outgroup members corresponded to more positive evaluations of Black characters, $F(1,42)=7.89, p=.01$, similar to the findings for participants in the non-stereotype condition. By contrast, among participants high in prejudice in the stereotype condition, evaluations of Black characters remained low, and did not significantly vary with respect to the degree of close contact they had with outgroup members, $F(1,38)=.86, p=.36$.

DISCUSSION

The present study makes a unique contribution to previous research on exposure to stereotypes in the media by examining how contact and prejudice simultaneously affect audience members' responses to stereotypical portrayals of Black Americans. Consistent with prior research, results indicate that both intergroup contact and levels of intergroup prejudice influence audience responses to stereotypical television portrayals. Additionally, findings from this study extend prior work by illustrating that contact and prejudice may interact in influencing these responses. While contact generally showed a positive effect on evaluations of Black characters, audience members high in prejudice consistently rated Black characters negatively when presented with stereotypical portrayals, irrespective of the close contact they may have had with other Black Americans.

These findings suggest that for those high in prejudice, viewing stereotypical portrayals of Blacks may offer confirmation for one's prejudicial beliefs; in turn, and perhaps reinforced by that confirmation, these beliefs may override the potentially positive effects of contact in evaluating outgroup targets. This interpretation is consistent with the notion that stereotypical humor activates a social norm suggesting that discriminatory responses to outgroup members are generally acceptable (Ford et al., 2001), particularly among highly prejudicial individuals who may be especially receptive to those messages. This view is also in line with other work indicating that intergroup responses of those high in prejudice may be affected more greatly by societal standards than those low in prejudice (Devine et al., 1991). Future research can provide greater insights into these relationships by explicitly probing the extent to which audience members perceive consensus about prejudice based on exposure to television content.

Beyond their relevance to research on media representations, the results of this study are also noteworthy with respect to the literature on intergroup contact. These media-based findings correspond with findings from studies of real-world intergroup contact, showing that greater contact can promote positive evaluations of outgroup members both in interpersonal interactions and in response to television portrayals. Although there are likely to be substantial differences between the effects of contact on social judgments in direct versus mediated settings, these results suggest valuable parallels that warrant further consideration, particularly among researchers who seek to abate the negative consequences associated with exposure to stereotypes in the media.

Limitations

One concern with the present study might stem from contentions that the measure

of interracial friendship was restricted. Although the most appropriate and meaningful measure of contact was employed (Pettigrew, 1997), that of friendship, the variable used in the current design was a single, self-report item. Thus, the individual respondents were required to define what represented closeness to a friend, potentially resulting in the exclusion of meaningful relationships. However, while this observation of interracial friendship may have been somewhat constrained, the capacity of contact to influence evaluations of the media and moderate the effects of prejudice suggests that its impact may actually be much stronger than that detected here. Certainly, greater effort is needed to expand on this area of inquiry and to identify additional variables pertinent to moderating media effects.

The present design also may have been limited by the particular sample. College students from an east coast university might differ in terms of the set of attributes that govern their ratings of media content. As such, we are cautious in our suggestion that the impact of prejudice and contact are limited to stereotypical depictions of outgroup members. Though this may be the case, further investigations aimed at this issue are necessary before this claim can be made with confidence.

Considerations for Future Research

Limitations notwithstanding, the current study has implications meriting additional consideration. Perhaps most importantly, it indicates that media images may provide a catalyst for normalizing racial stereotypes and expressing prejudicial attitudes that subsequently impact judgments and conceivably even later behavior. Moreover, these findings expand on the research on intergroup contact by providing evidence that positive contact effects can generalize beyond an immediate contact situation. Although the outcome of exposure observed in this study leaves questions unanswered, it helps lay the groundwork for examining more complex relationships with broader social consequences. For instance, if, through evaluative processes similar to those observed here, television programming activates specific attitudes associated with perceiving outgroup members as unintelligent, lazy, or aggressive, the implications hold more meaning. Content analyses showing primetime television's propensity to stereotypically represent racial minorities make this potential more real (see Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002 for review). While these are simply preliminary observations, they allude to a variety of possible outcomes and call for a more complete explication of the variables contributing to evaluations of media content.

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