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STEREOTYPES IN AFRICAN-AMERCAN TELEVISION SITCOMS:

A CONTENT ANALYSIS

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Communication

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements of the Degree

Master of Arts

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Abstract

STEREOTYPES IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN TELEVISION SITCOMS:

A CONTENT ANALYSIS

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University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2001

Reality of stereotypes and the portrayal of Blacks in television programming have become topics for political and social discourse within the field of mass communication. This study presents data on the portrayal of Blacks in network television situation comedies. It investigates perceptions of occupational roles, income, education, and living lifestyles in Black sitcoms for the network seasons of 1995-2000.

The first sub-hypothesis examined whether Blacks were portrayed in situation sitcoms as managerial professionals rather than service related non-professionals. Specific findings of this study indicated that Blacks were more often portrayed in the selected 1995-2000 television sitcoms as professionals rather than non-professionals.

The second sub-hypothesis stated that Blacks were portrayed as being of low socioeconomic status rather than high socioeconomic status. The three areas of income, education, and living lifestyles were used to evaluate this sub-hypothesis. Specific findings of this study indicated that Blacks were perceived as earning higher versus lower incomes and having higher versus lower levels of education. However, higher levels of education and income failed to translate into perceptions of higher living lifestyles for Blacks.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Television can be seen as reflecting our racial, ethnic, gender and sexual values. Present society in the United States is witness to extensive social inequality. Television, a medium of profound social implications, contributes to the social injustice by portraying Blacks in a negative light ("Critics say sitcoms reviving," 1997). Since television's introduction into society in the 1950s, some scholars have indicated that Blacks have been misrepresented in television by being shown in limited roles that depict them as stereotypical killers, prostitutes, pimps, clowns and drug dealers (Dates, 1980; Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, & Fontes, 1974). Television has been labeled as a medium that stereotypes almost all groups; however, its stereotypes are most especially damaging to minority groups (Dates, 1980).

The 1950s sitcoms "Amos n' Andy" lampooned Blacks as helpless scheming buffoons. Even as the civil rights movement of the 1960s brought racial struggles to the forefront, prime-time television continued to operate in a separate unknowing universe. The 1970s

began with Black standup comedian Flip Wilson achieving major crossover success as the host of his own variety series, *The Flip Wilson Show*. The *Jeffersons* (an *All in the Family* spin-off), *Good Times*, and *Sanford and Son* for the first time presented Black characters whose lives didn't revolve around Whites. More important, the programs, though based in comedy, didn't shy away from addressing racial issues (Gay, 1998).

The late 1970s and early 1980s, however, witnessed a discouraging return to Black characters. One of the biggest shows of the time, *Different Strokes*, featured two Black ghetto kids in the keeping of a rich White widow. The *Cosby Show* arrived in 1984 and became an immediate hit because its lack of stereotypical images. The *Cosby Show* paved the way for a smash spin-off, a *Different World*, and a handful of Black shows in the late 1980s, including *Amen, 227*, and *Family Matters* (Gay, 1998). The 1990s brought a new batch of Black sitcoms including *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *Hangin' with Mr. Cooper*.

Critics again charged that these sitcoms show Blacks as ridiculously one-dimensional people (Davis & Grandy, 1999). Sitcoms such as *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and *Martin* try to throw in political messages; however, these messages have little effect when they are presented among a crowd of humorous images (Davis & Grandy, 1999). Programs such as Fox's *In Living Color*, NBC's *Saturday Night Live*, and other comedy shows often make fun of Black personalities. Men in drag sketch comedies include demeaning portrayals of Black women, satires on Black preaching, and jokes about Black pimps and crack dealers.

Stereotypes in entertainment have endured a significant transition through the twentieth century. Images that are seen on television are internalized by Blacks and lead to negative self-concepts and low self-esteems (Davis & Grandy, 1999). Historical stereotypes from the 1950s were replaced by the 1970s "modern" stereotypes that portrayed Blacks negatively in their new roles. The portrayals of Blacks changed from their old roles as somewhat sinister, impish underlings to their new roles as non-threatening social

equals. These stereotypes could be divided into three categories: Blacks, who treat their blackness as a hobby, Blacks used as tokens, and Black dwarves (Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, & Fontes, 1974). This study will attempt to add to an understanding of these issues by examining the portrayal of Blacks in 1995-2000 situation sitcoms.

Review of Literature

Studies of the portrayal of ethnic minority groups on television have shown that such groups tend to be underrepresented and stereotyped when compared with their majority White counterparts. In the early days of television in the United States, for example, any depiction of Blacks was characterized by classic stereotypes of a casual, laid-back attitude to life typified by a narrow range of largely subordinate occupational and dramatic roles (Fife, 1981; Greenberg, 1980).

This literature review will investigate the issues of tokenism and negative stereotyping of Blacks in television and the portrayal of minorities in their television character roles. The literature will focus on three aspects of television stereotype portrayals: the historical

depiction of Blacks in television, the racial identity of Blacks concerning stereotypes, and the socialization agent of the Black viewer.

The literature will also examine the portrayal of minority men and women in their television character roles, character role trends of Blacks, and the role significance for Blacks.

Historical Portrayals

Television is labeled as a medium that stereotypes almost all groups. Its stereotypes are however most damaging to minority groups (Dates, 1980). Television creates historical realities of Blacks being in slavery, discrimination, and racism (Gray, 1989). For example, there is the depiction of Black women as the "Mammy", who is portrayed as an obese woman of dark complexion with extremely large breasts and buttocks and shiny white teeth (Hudson, 1998). The "Jezebel" image is contrasted to the mammy. She is portrayed as a mulatto or fair-complexioned black female, who is depicted as alluring, sexually arousing and seductive. The "Sapphire", TV's newly created image, is most notable for her sassiness, which is exceeded

only by her verbosity. The "Sapphire" is noted for telling people off and spouting her opinion in an animated loud manner. For example, the housekeeper Nell on "Gimme a Break" and the waitress Shirley on "What's Happening" and its sequel "What's Happening Now" illustrate women covered in "hot" Mammy imagery (Hudson, 1998).

The Jezebel is often presented in "hot" imagery on daytime television. For example, hot Jezebel images are common to the current talk show circuit. Shows like *Richard Bey, Gordon, Ricki Lake, Rolanda, Jerry Springer*, and *Montel Williams* present the Jezebel as a real person (Hudson, 1998). Many of these widely accepted and culturally diffused images of Blacks emerged from the American South (Hudson, 1998). Previous scholars have indicated that media have attempted to cover these past injustices but it has been with minimal news coverage (Bogart, 1968).

Critics charged that the social progress of Blacks and minorities was hindered by the manner in which minorities were portrayed on television (Dates, 1980; Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, & Fontes, 1974). Even after the civil rights legislation of the 1960s and 70s, media

reports continued to show Black men and youth standing on corners, Blacks arrested for crime, Blacks associated with violence and drugs, and social problems (Gray, 1989; Tan, 1979). Davis and Gandy (1999) suggest that Black men at the center of criminal trials attract significant media attention that affects public attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. These types of media portrayal in Black communities reinforce the dominant stereotypical images of the violent Black male. Media reports also portray Black women as being unmarried and supporting a baby on welfare while the father is absent (Gray, 1989).

Such negative portrayals shape audience impressions of the stereotyped group (Tan, 1979). This claim is supported by the social learning theory that states that heavy television viewing, for example, is often proceeded by lower education, lower mobility, lower aspirations, and higher anxieties (Tan, 1979). Scholars have claimed that excessive exposure to television has had influence over others by which these racial representations and understandings are produced and conveyed through media representation (Gray, 1989).

Black families have been negatively represented in television programming scheduling since the 1950s (Merritt & Stroman, 1993). Historically, Blacks have not been given significant television roles. They have been shown as auxiliaries to Whites and relegated in minor and bit part roles (Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, & Fontes 1974). Recent studies have looked at these portrayals through the eyes of adolescents. They see more negative depictions of Blacks than Whites (Allen, 1998).

Negative stereotypes of ethnic minorities have been used to assert and reinforce the position of the White man's world (Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, & Fontes, 1974). Hinton, Seggar, Northcott and Fontes (1974) define television Black stereotypes as lazy, stupid, violent and subordinate to Whites. Past scholars have indicated that these portrayals create, reinforce, and perpetuate a myth of White superiority that supports the dominant paradigm (Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, & Fontes, 1974). These portrayals of Blacks present a major problem to society.

Findings from the literature have indicated that CBS, ABC, and FOX networks are the principal contributors to Black tokenism on television (Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, & Fontes, 1974; Hudson, 1998). Also, research by Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, and Fontes (1974) supported the position of Black critics that the White controlled television industry historically pursued a policy of tokenism in the casting of Blacks in television roles.

Historical Character Roles

From 1965 to 1968, television did not portray many minority group members, especially Blacks (Seggar, 1977). Television in its portrayal of the American Negro has come a long way from "Amos 'n' Andy" portraying Black women and men as happy-go lucky and un-reliable (Northcott, Seggar, & Hinton, 1973; Dominick & Bradley, 1970). Three Black actresses had lead roles as a maid in the series "Beulah" perpetuating a female stereotype while Eddie Anderson was Jack Benny's valet, the male counterpart to Beulah (Dominick & Greenberg, 1970). The American Negroes were two percent of all characters in the past (Seggar, 1977). The increase in minority

portrayal at the end of the Civil Rights thrust in the late sixties was partially due to pressures exerted by lobby groups, actors, guilds, and the Black Congressional Caucus (Seggar, 1977).

On the producers' side, both contextual and explicit layers of meaning are consciously or unconsciously built into the content of program production (Smythe, 1954). During the 1950s proportionately more of the heroes were White Americans and few of them were Black (Smythe, 1954).

In the television depictions of character roles of the early 1950s, the heroes from among American Whites were males rather than females by a ratio of three to one (Smythe, 1954). Past critics have questioned the extent of situation comedies offering more favorable portrayals of Blacks and women (Lemon, 1977). For Blacks, the picture is mixed. In situation comedies, Blacks have stronger portrayals than Whites, although Blacks were unfavorably portrayed in crime dramas (Lemon 1977). Literature has suggested that in situation comedies that deal with family situations, interpersonal

problems, and casual plots, portrayals of women and Blacks were usually restricted to secondary domestic roles (Lemon 1977).

Female characters on family oriented television shows have been presented in dependent, traditional, and often silly roles (O'Kelly & Bloomquist, 1976; Lemon, 1977; Smythe, 1954; Seggar, 1975). Lemon (1977) also has indicated that the Black female was generally confined to an all-Black environment and is not portrayed as competent individual who is coping with mainstream culture.

Role Significance for Men and Women

Occupational portrayal is defined as the appearance of a person on the television performing some kind of recognizable occupational duty (DeFleur, 1972). There is notable concentration of negative attributes among certain kind of workers. Persons shown in professional and managerial roles are perceived more positive. For example, past scholars have indicated that journalist is generally closer to community ideals and teachers are typically shown as the cleanest, kindest, and the fairest (Smythe, 1954). Television seeks to

entertain, to excite and to move the viewer away from realities rather than toward them (DeFleur, 1972).

Occupational status becomes relevant for men of high social status and for women of low social status. Occupational status, when relevant, has been a more important determinant indicator of dominance of race and sex (Lemon, 1977). For example, the largest single occupation for women in the television world, as in the real world, was that of a housewife. Some scholars have indicated that occupational portrayals for Blacks in lower status occupations would be taken as evidence to support tokenism and stereotyping charges (Northcott, Seggar, & Hinton, 1973). Other findings for occupational status indicated that women were represented in only five occupations: musician, secretary, nurse, and reporters (O'Kelly & Bloomquist, 1976).

Racial Identity Associated with Stereotypes

Critical cultural theories examine the ways a culture is actually produced, reproduced, and changed through struggles among differing ideologies (Wood, 1997). These theories are devoted to

analyzing the means by which dominant groups in society impose their ideology on less powerful groups.

Culture consists of ideology, which includes ideas, values, beliefs, and an understanding that is common to members of a society (Wood, 1997). Ideology is a code of meanings that shape how a group of people sees the world. The dominant ideology maintains its domination by virtue of the support of social institutions, such as churches and temples, schools, legislatures, and media (Wood, 1997). Media also become a potent tool of the dominant ideology by portraying minorities most often as criminals, victims, subordinates, or otherwise less respectable people. Wood (1997) refers to this as the ongoing battle for ideological control as "theatre of struggle" or theatre of conflict.

Early research on identity and the media reflects the dominant effect paradigm and tends to focus on television (Davis & Gandy, 1999). Media representation plays an important role in informing the ways in which we understand social, cultural, ethnic, and racial differences (Davis & Gandy, 1999). Blacks on television can be

portrayed in a positive light instead of the usual stereotypical roles reflecting the "Sambo syndrome" (Inniss & Feagin, 1995). However, criticisms lodged against *The Cosby Show* included charges that it was not "Black" enough because the family life being portrayed was not realistic and that the show minimized Black issues (Inniss & Feagin, 1995).

Racial identity and racial group orientation are at the heart of research programs that explore the unique character of the African-American belief systems. Media representations of people of color, particularly Blacks, have been the topic of historical research projects (Davis & Gandy, 1999). Racial identity becomes salient when Black audiences oppose what they see and hear from an ideological position as harmful, unpleasant, or distasteful media representation (Davis & Gandy, 1999). Black males being depicted as violent and threatening are examples of stereotypes that many Blacks resist (Davis & Gandy, 1999).

Davis and Gandy (1999) suggest that media orientation is the product of socialization. Television is a primary source of information

about another race for certain segments of the younger viewing audience (Greenberg, 1972; Asante, 1976; Greenberg & Dominick, 1969). Individuals of other cultures identify with regularly featured Black performers. They considered their roles to be real as they apply this realism outside of television (Greenberg, 1972). For example, a viewer of television sees the portrayal of a Black family on television and applies these negative stereotypical character roles to real life (Greenberg, 1969). There has been little change with the dominant racial ideology of media towards Blacks. Media provides a space which continually updates and recreates these negative self-images (Hudson, 1998).

Additional literature suggests that television is a political instrument in the sense that it creates its own territory (Asante, 1976). Television during the 1960s educated large portions of the Black community on the knowledge of general violence against Blacks and became the primary medium through which Black leaders could politicize the Blacks masses (Asante, 1976). Commercial television has tried to correct the flaws present in earlier programming by

including various Black leading figures in the regular run of good

versus evil dramas, soap operas and fantasies. Some scholars

indicated that this has helped to alleviate some of the racism

transmitted through electronic media (1976). Research has found that

Blacks tend to believe that Black television characters are more true-

to-life than non-Blacks (Dates, 1980).

Socialization Agent of Stereotypes

American television is unabashedly profit-dominated and

because of this has discriminated in its programming against

minorities, whether defined by age, ethnicity, or otherwise, in favor of

audience whose hugeness rests on heterogeneity (Comstock &

Cobbey, 1979). Television has a significant role in the socialization of

children (Stroman 1986; Greenberg & Dominick, 1969; Comstock &

Cobbey, 1979: DeFluer, 1962). Socialization takes place largely

through accidental or haphazard exposure to a variety of media

elements. Some individuals believe that media, particularly television,

shape ideas and attitudes about what kinds of family structures and

interaction are acceptable and appropriate, and what kind of media representation are serious and funny (Merritt & Stroman, 1993).

Black audiences are also perceived as victims of negative one-dimensional and stereotypical media images. These images lead to negative self-concepts and low self-esteem in Black children and adolescents (Stroman, 1986). The theory of selective exposure, through a more general line of reasoning, supports these findings by audience choice based on consistency in values, beliefs, and identities (Davis & Gandy, 1999).

Some research suggested that Blacks on average are heavier viewers of television than Whites (Bogart, 1968). However, higher educated Blacks watch less television than their less-educated peers (Comstock & Cobbey, 1979). The evidence suggested that minority children identify with the negative portrayals of television characters and associate themselves with children of lower socioeconomic status because of their reliance on television (Comstock & Cobbey, 1979). Some research has found that Black teenagers rely more on

television than do White teenagers for social information and how to behave with the opposite sex (Comstock & Cobbey, 1979).

Some studies have found that teen-agers from low-income homes spend more of their media time with television than middle-incomes teen-agers, and more absolute time with TV (Greenberg & Dominick, 1969). Research has shown, however, that even within the low-income families, there are differences between Whites and Blacks (Greenberg & Dominick, 1969). Previous scholars have indicated that Blacks typically earn less money than their White counterparts, and are more likely to live in an inner-city ghetto and are more likely to engage in "fantasy" behaviors (Greenberg & Dominick, 1969). Studies have indicated that the roles in which Blacks are cast communicate to Black children the negative value society places on them (Stroman, 1986). Because of these stereotypes, media has been charged with intensifying social disturbances in the Black community and lowering Blacks' self-esteems (Allen & Bielby, 1979).

Research has found that Blacks who watch TV entertainment a lot were more likely to report low self-esteem than Blacks who watched TV entertainment less (Tan, 1979; Rubin, 1970). Women watched 41 percent of daytime and fringe television more often than men (Bogart, 1968) and 61 percent of the Black children reported regularly watching stereotypical Black shows more often than Whites (Greenberg, 1972).

Summary

Many of the historical stereotypes of Blacks date back in origin over 150 years. Why have these stereotypical images persisted? Some explain the persistence of stereotypes using identity politics and the politics of power (Hudson, 1998).

In the eyes of children, it's a White, White world on television. In sitcoms and dramas they see Whites overwhelmingly appearing in positive roles – as rich, smart, well educated, and more likely to be the boss. By contrast, minorities, if present at all, typically play negative or subservient roles that cast them as maids, janitors, or criminals, and as poor, lazy, and less intelligent (Gardner, 1998;

Allen, 1998). Also, the news media tend to portray Blacks more negatively than Whites. The portrayal of Blacks is that they are doing drugs, carrying around drugs, shooting people and stealing things (Allen, 1998).

The existence of stereotypes on television is obvious. A 1985 ABC survey concluded that "Blacks are generally stereotyped, with 49 percent of all Blacks playing roles of criminals, servants, entertainers, or athletes" (Perry, 1994). Again, television creates and sustains the majority's accepted social stereotypes of minority groups. Television presentation of minorities continues to be negatively portrayed. The past and current literature suggest that these injustices continue to occur.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the issue of stereotypes of Blacks in television. The study examines this issue by evaluating minority character role portrayals in situation sitcoms of the 1995 to 2000 series. The basic research question of the present study is: Are Blacks portrayed in situation sitcoms as non-professionals rather than professionals? This question relates to the occupational roles of Black characters and how they've been portrayed historically in prime-time television.

One hypothesis and two sub-hypotheses were tested to add to the understanding of these issues:

H1:   Negative racial stereotypes exist in Black sitcoms for the network seasons of 1995-2000.

H1 Sub. 1. Blacks are portrayed as non-professionals rather than professionals.

H1 Sub. 2. Blacks are portrayed as living in a low socioeconomic status rather than high socioeconomic status.

Chapter 2

Methodology

The present study uses a critical analysis of Black sitcoms to determine if stereotypical portrayals of Black characters still exist in prime-time television. Gordon Berry (1980) identified frequent representations of Black, minority, and lower-class life-styles appearing on television and concluded that parent and sibling aggressive behavior disrupt family representations; families show a continuous picture of female-dominated households; and families show that a male father figure is more likely to be absent (1980).

The first sub-hypothesis deals with the issue of Blacks being portrayed in situation sitcoms as non-professionals rather than professionals. This question relates to the clearly observable occupational roles of Black characters and how they're being portrayed in prime-time television.

The second sub-hypothesis focuses on the observable socioeconomic status of Black characters in situation sitcoms as it relates to income, education, and living lifestyles: Blacks being

portrayed as low socioeconomic status rather than high socioeconomic status.

The programs that were examined for this analysis were limited to 50 hours of half-hour, prime-time situation comedies that feature recurring intact Black families that posses observable characteristics of occupation, socioeconomic features, gender, and marital status. During the 1995-2000 seasons, eight shows were identified and selected that met these requirements: (1) The (new) *Cosby Show*, which features a mother, a father, one daughter, and a live in male guest; (2) *Sister Sister*, which is composed of dual-parents, two twin daughters, and the daughters' boy friends; (3) *Wayan Brothers*, which features a father, two brothers, and a female family friend; (4) *Steve Harvey*, which features a teacher, a principal, a secretary, a coach, and students; (5) *Jamie Fox*, which features an aunt and uncle as owners, a nephew, and front desk employees; (6) *Smart Guy*, which features a father, two sons, a daughter, and friend; (7) the *Hughleys,* which features a mother, father, a son, a daughter, and family friend;

and (8) *Martin Lawrence*, which features a male and female relationship, three friends, and a female neighbor.

The shows were randomly selected, coded, and analyzed. Coding was conducted by the following three individuals: (1) Black female between the age 55-60 years of age. She is employed as a payroll administrator and has received her associates' degree. Her experience with Black sitcoms is leisure watching. (2) White female between the age of 35-40 years of age. She is employed as a payroll administrator and has some college. Her experience with Black sitcoms is also leisure watching. (3) Hispanic female between the age of 40-45 years of age and is employed as a human resource specialist. She received a 2-year degree. Her experience with Black sitcoms is leisure watching.

Analyses

Each coder participated in a series of training sessions before the research began. These sessions were designed to familiarize coders with the details of the coding schedule, their understanding of definitions, instructions for distinguishing category portrayals, and the

general procedures under which the content analysis was conducted. Coding errors during the research itself triggered further training sessions.

A pre-test was conducted to test the reliability of coding. Three shows were selected. Three tapes were selected that had the same shows on it and were labeled "Pretest A", "Pretest B", and "Pretest C". The same shows were shown to all three coders and the coding sheet was both qualitatively and quantitatively verified. The formula that was used in computing the coefficient of reliability was **CR = 2M / N (1) + N (2)** where M is the number of coding decisions on which the coders agreed, and N + N refers to the number of coding decisions made by the three coders (Holsti, 1969).

Additional qualitative checks included continuous monitoring of the judgements made by each coder at key decision points in the application coding frames. Quantitative checks on coding reliability focused on levels of agreement between the three coders in their responses that initiated additional analyses of the pre-test. The reliability of the initial pre-test was .74. There were concerns with

number of coding decisions that the three coders agreed upon with

the following categories: occupational roles of males (.72), income

category male (.67), income category female (.63), education female

(.56), and living lifestyles male (.46).

These results triggered a re-work and collapsing of the

following categories: income male (.85) and female (.69); education

male (.86) and female (.81); living lifestyles male (.86) and female

(.75); marital status male (.92) and female (.94). The reliability

increased to .84 from the collapsing of these categories.

Analysis of the data was completed once all data were received

for 50 hours of situation sitcoms.

Table 1

Reliabilities for Content Measures

Gender	Occupational Roles	Income	Education	Living Lifestyles	Marital Status
Male	.72	.85	.86	.86	.92
Female	1.00	.69	.81	.75	.94

As displayed in Table 1, the reliability on each of the variables was satisfactory, as indicated by the level of agreement that ranged from .69 to 1.0.

Random selection of the tapes was conducted. Each six-hour tape was coded with a numerical assignment from 1-20. The three coders randomly selected from a pool of numbers and were assigned a series of tapes to analyze.

Definitions

Any content analysis of television situation comedies begins with a definition. Modification of the following definitions by Seggar (1975), Seggar (1979), Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, and Fontes (1974), and DeFleur (1964) were used to determine imagery adopted for use in the present study. The following definitions were established for the purpose of this study:

(a)   **Occupational role** - The classification of clearly observable tasks being performed using the following broad occupational categories used by the Standard Occupational Classification

(SOC) system. Summary and major occupation categories are as follows:

<u>Managerial and professional specialty occupations</u>:

    Executive, administrative, and managerial occupations

    Professional specialty occupations

    <u>Technical, sales, and administrative support occupations:</u>

    Technicians and related support occupations

    Sales occupations

    Administrative support occupations, including clerical

    <u>Service occupations</u>:

    Private household occupations

    Protective service occupations

    Service occupations, except protective and household

    Farming, forestry, and fishing occupations

    Precision production, craft, and repair occupations

<u>Undetermined</u>

(b)   **Socioeconomic status -** The observable classification of income, education, and living lifestyles. Summary and classification are as follows:

Income Categories:

$25,000 and under

$25,000 - $35,000

$35,000 and above

Undetermined

Education Categories:

High school & below

High school & college

Undetermined

Living Lifestyles:

Upscale

Middle Class

Working Class & Lower Income

Older & retired

Setting

Each coder had a VCR and randomly selected tape (See

Appendix A). The coding schedule contained a series of questions

about each program and about the nature of each program (See

Appendix B). Program information schedules captured the channel on

which the show appeared and its transmission time. Each program's

setting, environmental historical setting, and form of character role

were also recorded.

Independent and Dependent Variables

The independent variable for the purpose of this study was the

race of the characters. For the purpose of this study the dependent

variables were the occupational roles and socioeconomic status of

the characters.

Tests

Chi-square analyses were used to determine if a difference

existed for depiction of the various portrayals of occupational roles,

and socioeconomic status.

Chapter 3

<u>Results</u>

The findings are presented first of occupational roles of Blacks

and second of socioeconomic portrayals of Blacks.

<u>Occupational Roles of Blacks</u>

Table 2 presents findings regarding occupational portrayals of

Blacks in the selected television sitcoms. The first sub-hypothesis

stated that Blacks were portrayed in situation sitcoms as non-

professionals rather than professionals. This hypothesis was rejected.

Results were the opposite - - blacks were portrayed in Black situation

comedies as professionals. The chi-square statistic was used to

determine whether these percentages were significantly different. It

was found that there was an overall difference (chi-square = 13.12,

p<. 001) among the occupational roles of managerial (49%), technical

(3%), service (22%), and unidentified occupational roles (labeled

"undetermined") (26%).

When specific roles pairs were tested, it was found that Blacks were portrayed as managerial versus service (chi-square = 10.59, p < .01) and managerial versus technical (chi-square = 42.66, p < .001).

Table 2

Chi Square Analysis of Black Occupational Roles in Television Sitcoms

Occupational Role	Managerial	Technical	Service	Undetermined
Frequency Chi Square, p	51 (49%) 13.12, p < .001	3 (3%)	23 (22%)	28 (26%)
Frequency Chi Square, p	51 (49%) 10.59, p < .01		23 (22%)	
Frequency Chi Square, P	51 (49%) 42.66, p < .001	3 (3%)		

Analysis of Black Socioeconomic Status

The second sub-hypothesis stated that Blacks were portrayed as being of low socioeconomic status rather than high socioeconomic status. The three areas of income, education, and living lifestyles were used to evaluate this sub-hypothesis.

Table 3 presents findings regarding average income levels of Blacks. Data for 111 Blacks were recorded. Chi-square analysis revealed significant differences (chi- square = 7.30, p < .05) among the three average income categories of Blacks, 22 (20%) $25,000, 20

(18%) between $25,000 and $34,999, and 38 (34%) greater than $35,000.

Specific differences were found between greater than $35,000 and less than $25,000 (chi-square = 4.26, p< .05) and between greater than $35,000 and $25,000 to $34,999 (chi-square = 5.58, p <. 05). These results were opposite of what was predicted. For the shows sampled, Blacks were portrayed as having higher versus lower incomes.

Table 3

Chi Square Analysis of Black Average Incomes in Television Sitcoms

Average Incomes	Less than $25,000	$25,000 - $35,000	$35,000 and greater
Frequency Chi Square, p	22 (20%)	20 (18%)	38 (34%) 7.30, p < .05
Frequency Chi Square, p	22 (20%)		38 (34%) 4.26, p < .05
Frequency Chi Square, p		20 (18%)	38 (34%) 5.58, p < .05

The second part of the sub-hypothesis (Blacks are portrayed as being of low socioeconomic status rather than high socioeconomic status) examined educational levels of Blacks. Among the 1995-2000 situation comedies, Table 4 presents findings regarding education levels. Chi-square analysis revealed significant differences (chi-

square = 8.09, p < .01) among the education levels, 25 (25%) were rated as having less than a high school education, 47 (47%) high school and some college, and 29 (28%) represented unidentified educational levels (classified "Undetermined").

Specific differences were found between education levels that were less than high school and some college (chi-square = 6.72, p < .01). These results were again opposite of what was predicted. For the shows sampled, Blacks were portrayed as having high school and some college versus less than a high school education.

Table 4

Chi Square Analysis of Black Education Level in Television Sitcoms

Education Level	< High School	Some College	Undetermined
Frequency Chi Square, p	25 (25%)	47 (47%) 8.09, p < .01	29 (28%)
Frequency Chi Square, p	25 (25%)	47 (47%) 6.72, p < .01	

The third part of this hypothesis (Blacks are portrayed as being of low socioeconomic status rather than high socioeconomic status) examined living lifestyles as being upper, middle, and working class. Table 5 presents findings regarding the living lifestyles of Blacks. Chi-

square analysis revealed significant differences (chi-square = 41.22, p < .001) among their living lifestyles, 14 (13%) were upper class, 30 (26%) were middle class, and 68 (61%) were working class. Specific differences were found between the living lifestyles of upper and middle (chi-square = 5.82, p < .05), between upper and working (chi-square = 35.56, p < .001), and between middle and working (chi-square = 14.72, p < .001). These results were similar to what was predicted. For the shows sampled, Blacks were portrayed as lower socioeconomic status (living lifestyles) rather than high socioeconomic status.

The second sub-hypothesis stated that Blacks are portrayed as being of low socioeconomic status rather than high socioeconomic status. This hypothesis was partially accepted and rejected. Results that partially accepted the sub-hypothesis were that Blacks were portrayed as earning a higher level of education and higher incomes. However, their higher education and income failed to translate into higher living lifestyles.

Table 5

Chi Square Analysis of Black Living Lifestyles in Television Sitcoms

Living Lifestyles	Upper	Middle	Working
Frequency Chi Square, p	14 (13%)	30 (26%)	68 (61%) 14.72, p < .001
Frequency Chi Square, p	14 (13%)	30 (26%) 5.82, p < .05	
Frequency Chi Square, p	14 (13%)		68 (61%) 35.56, p < .001
Frequency Chi Square, p		30 (26%)	68 (61%) 14.72, p < .001

Chapter 4

Discussion

The findings of the content analysis sought to describe measurable observable portrayals of Blacks in their occupational roles and their socioeconomic status that included income, education, and living lifestyles. An "occupational portrayal" was defined as the appearance of a person on television performing some kind of recognizable occupational duty. The socioeconomic status was measured by evaluating income, education, and living lifestyles of Blacks in TV situation comedies of 1995-2000.

The specific findings of this study suggest that: (1) Blacks are shown in 1995-2000 TV situation comedies significantly more often as managerial professionals rather than non-professionals (Table 2); (2) Blacks are shown in these shows as earning higher versus lower incomes (Table 3); (3) Blacks are shown as obtaining higher levels of education (Table 4); but (4) Blacks are not shown as living the lifestyles that support their professional positions, education, and income levels (Table 5).

It was often the position of critics during the 1970s and early 1980s that the White controlled television industry was pursuing a policy of stereotyping in the casting of Blacks in television roles. However, in the year 2000, many critics appeared to cling to this same belief. The results of this study failed to lend support to these claims for television sitcoms of 1995-2000.

Critics have also argued that the television industry was portraying consistent negative stereotypes of Blacks as being lazy, stupid, and violent and subordinate to Whites, which helped to perpetuate racism in American society. However, no support was found for these claims in the present study. Blacks, in fact, were portrayed very well in the sampled 1995-2000 television comedies. In the present study Blacks were seen in professional roles (teachers, hotel management, doctors, and professional business owners); there was no evidence to support tokenism and stereotyping charges. In fact Blacks appeared more often as higher status managerial professionals and less often as lower status service workers.

This study also provided support that Blacks in these shows were earning a higher versus lower income (Table 3). In this study there were 34 percent of Blacks that were perceived by the raters as earning an average income of $35,000 and greater. The findings provide support for the common assumption that there is a relationship between occupation status and average incomes. Blacks were seen as earning higher incomes that are commonly associated with professional occupations.

It also seems the portrayals of Blacks in television situation comedies are becoming more realistic. Blacks were shown in these shows as obtaining higher levels of education (Table 4). Blacks were seen more often as having high school and college. Previous literature suggested that Blacks were portrayed on television as lazy and stupid. The findings of this study failed to lend any supportive evidence to this claim.

A major discovery in this study was that Blacks are not shown as living the lifestyles that are generally linked with professional positions, education, and higher income levels. Perhaps the most

intriguing finding of the present study is the discrepancy between occupational status, education level, and income and lifestyles. Were the Black television sitcoms of 1995-2000 giving an accurate portrayal of Blacks? If so, some interesting questions are raised. 1) Although Blacks are seen as professionals, having higher education levels, and earning higher incomes, have Blacks become comfortable with their living arrangements and made an active choice not to move into suburban modernized neighborhoods that would support their higher income levels? 2) Is the perception of Black's living arrangements that were perceived by the raters in these selected situation comedies a false reality of Blacks and their living conditions? 3) Does stereotyping exist in real estate that prevents Blacks from living in more suburban modernized communities that would support their higher professional status, education, and income? Or are the findings of the present study an indication that television portrayals are still, in a subtle manner, stereotyping Blacks?

There is no doubt that Blacks are seen as more educated, earning higher incomes. It appears that while Blacks have improved

their situation as far as occupation portrayals and role significance in these selected TV situation comedies, other questions raised are "Will the changes made by TV networks be permanent?" Will other minority groups experience a similar cycle? Will the white controlled television industry hire more minority screenwriters that will provide a more accurate portrayal of minorities or is the current portrayal of minorities an accurate depiction?

It should be clear that the data presented here indicate that TV 1995-2000 situation comedies has improved upon the portrayals of Blacks on television. Previous studies from the 1970s and early 1980s indicated lack of changes taking place in the portrayal of Blacks. Whether these changes are planned and systematic is open to question at this point. Overall, Blacks in the examined 1995-2000 television sitcoms were shown as competent in tasks they were shown to be financially stable. However, they were often shown to live in housing that failed to support their professional positions, education levels, and higher incomes.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The specific findings of this study suggest that: in television

sitcoms of 1995-2000 (1) Blacks were shown significantly more often

in professional positions rather than non-professional positions; (2)

Blacks were portrayed as high socioeconomic status individuals

rather than low socioeconomic status but not necessarily living the life

styles associated with their status.

The specific findings of occupational role portrayal of Blacks are

contrary to previous literature. Previous literature has suggested that

Blacks were seen more often in lower status occupations that

supported tokenism and stereotyping charges. Previous literature

also has suggested that Blacks in lower status occupations would be

taken as evidence to support their lower socioeconomic status. The

findings of this study lend no support to this overall claim.

In this study, Blacks for the most part were seen in major

significant roles. This is contrary to previous historical portrayals such

as the 1950s sitcom "Amos n' Andy" in which Blacks were lampooned

as helpless scheming buffoons. The findings of this study suggest that the television industry in general has felt the pressure for change brought by the Black minority, and has responded by making changes. The results of this study, which are based on examination of only eight Black television sitcoms, by no means suggest that substantial change has occurred in the world of television. Television generally remains a profit-dominated industry that appeals to what the mass audiences want to see.

This is a study representing just one facet of the much larger problem of economic and occupational discrimination. Because of visibility, it appears that media has responded favorably in this study's limited sample to the portrayals of Black representation in the television industry. Television is a medium that, in part, reflects the world and shapes the world of which it is a part. It has been suggested by past scholars that television's negative portrayal of Blacks has shaped and influenced audience beliefs and impressions. However, television reflects selectively and projects a somewhat transformed image of reality back upon the world. The selection

process, which governs what is projected, is in part determined by factors reflecting trends and events taking place in society. It may be that the more favorable treatment and representation of Blacks in terms of tokenism and stereotyping found in this study, in part, at least reflects the successes of the Black civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Furthermore, it is evident from this study that while Blacks are being portrayed more often as professionals, earning higher incomes, and becoming more educated that portrayal of their living lifestyles has not changed.

Since Blacks are being portrayed in a full range of professional roles (lawyers, college teachers, medical doctors, or business people) compared to previous historical portrayals (Blacks being arrested for crime, Blacks being associated with violence and drugs, and social problems) this study indicates that television has made substantial progress; however, television still has a way to go.

Limitations

One of the difficulties in recording data in a television content analysis such as the present study is the tremendous variability in the occupational role portrayals, perceived income levels, and education levels. In some cases, a considerable amount of information may be obtained by noting the actual occupational task and looking at the context of the story in determining education levels and living arrangements. In other cases, little or no information concerning these variables may be obtained. This variability is reflected in the varying sample sizes reported for each of the characteristics under consideration.

A major limitation in this study was the lack of television shows other than sitcoms on the major networks that had predominately Black casts. Thus the focus in this study was on eight situation comedies. Conclusions concerning overall television portrayal of Blacks cannot be drawn from this limited sample.

Future Research

Based on what was learned in the present study, the following

recommendations are made. (1) Gender differences in the different

occupational roles of Black males and females need to be analyzed.

This would allow for a greater understanding of the varying television

roles that males and females are associated with and if a gender bias

exists in casting of these character roles. (2) Black network television

dramas need to also be examined to see if a difference exists in the

portrayals of Blacks in television situation comedies versus television

dramas. (3) Predominately White network television situation

comedies and dramas in which Blacks are also cast need to be

analyzed to see how Blacks are portrayed. In addition, the observable

interactions between Whites and Blacks in their roles and how they

relate to one another also need to be determined. (4) There is a need

for more systematic content analysis of the messages that

accompany stereotypical representation in television situation

comedies and dramas to determine potential impact on the self-

esteems of Black teenagers who watch these shows. (6) Additional

studies need to be made that investigate the reasoning associated with Blacks being portrayed as living in sub-modernized communities even though they have achieved higher occupational status and incomes.

Overall, this study provided a portrait of how Blacks were being portrayed in Black television sitcoms from 1995-2000. Because of the small, selected sample and the methodological limitations of the present study, global conclusions and generalizations concerning portrayal of Blacks on television and in society cannot be made from this study. However, if this study is representative of Black's portrayal on television, perhaps the television industry has made a substantial improvement in portrayal of Blacks.

Previous scholars have suggested that Blacks were being misrepresented in television by being shown in limited roles. However, this study has raised questions concerning this assumption and has paved the way for additional research on the topic of minority portrayals in the mass media.

Appendix A:

Random Tape Selection

TAPE – 6 HOURS	RANDOM #	CODER
SITCOMS	01	Toni
SITCOMS	02	Terry
STICOMS	03	Donna
SITCOMS	04	Toni
SITCOMS	05	Terry
SITCOMS	06	Donna
SITCOMS	07	Toni
SITCOMS	08	Toni
SITCOMS	09	Toni
SITCOMS	10	Toni
SITCOMS	11	Terry
SITCOMS	12	Terry
SITCOMS	13	Terry
SITCOMS	14	Donna
SITCOMS	15	Donna
SITCOMS	16	Donna
SITCOMS	17	Terry
SITCOMS	18	Toni
SITCOMS	19	Donna
SITCOMS	20	Terry
PRETEST	A	Toni
PRETEST	B	Donna
PRETEST	C	Terry

Appendix B.

Coding Sheet

Network
Indicate Network

Shows
Indicate Show

Occupational Roles
Circle One for each category that applies

male 1	Managerial Professional	Technical, Sales and Admin	Service Occupations	Operators, fabricators	Undetermined
male 2	Managerial Professional	Technical, Sales and Admin	Service Occupations	Operators, fabricators	Undetermined
male 3	Managerial Professional	Technical, Sales and Admin	Service Occupations	Operators, fabricators	Undetermined
male 4	Managerial Professional	Technical, Sales and Admin	Service Occupations	Operators, fabricators	Undetermined
male 5	Managerial Professional	Technical, Sales and Admin	Service Occupations	Operators, fabricators	Undetermined
male 6	Managerial Professional	Technical, Sales and Admin	Service Occupations	Operators, fabricators	Undetermined
female 1	Managerial Professional	Technical, Sales and Admin	Service Occupations	Operators, fabricators	Undetermined
female 2	Managerial Professional	Technical, Sales and Admin	Service Occupations	Operators, fabricators	Undetermined
female 3	Managerial Professional	Technical, Sales and Admin	Service Occupations	Operators, fabricators	Undetermined
female 4	Managerial Professional	Technical, Sales and Admin	Service Occupations	Operators, fabricators	Undetermined
female 5	Managerial Professional	Technical, Sales and Admin	Service Occupations	Operators, fabricators	Undetermined
female 6	Managerial Professional	Technical, Sales and Admin	Service Occupations	Operators, fabricators	Undetermined

Socioeconomic Status
Circle One for each category that applies
Income

male 1	25k and Under	$25K – 35K	$35K and above	Undetermined
male 2	25k and Under	$25K – 35K	$35K and above	Undetermined
male 3	25k and Under	$25K – 35K	$35K and above	Undetermined
male 4	25k and Under	$25K – 35K	$35K and above	Undetermined
male 5	25k and Under	$25K – 35K	$35K and above	Undetermined
male 6	25k and Under	$25K – 35K	$35K and above	Undetermined
female 1	25k and Under	$25K – 35K	$35K and above	Undetermined

female 2	25k and Under	$25K – 35K	$35K and above	Undetermined
female 3	25k and Under	$25K – 35K	$35K and above	Undetermined
female 4	25k and Under	$25K – 35K	$35K and above	Undetermined
female 5	25k and Under	$25K – 35K	$35K and above	Undetermined
female 6				

Education

male 1	High school and below	High school & college	Undetermined
male 2	High school and below	High school & college	Undetermined
male 3	High school and below	High school & college	Undetermined
male 4	High school and below	High school & college	Undetermined

Education con't

	High school and below		
male 5	High school and below	High school & college	Undetermined
male 6	High school and below	High school & college	Undetermined
female 1	High school and below	High school & college	Undetermined
female 2	High school and below	High school & college	Undetermined
female 3	High school and below	High school & college	Undetermined
female 4	High school and below	High school & college	Undetermined
female 5	High school and below	High school & college	Undetermined
female 6	High school and below	High school & college	Undetermined

Living Lifestyles

male 1	Upscale	Middle Class	Working Class & Lower Income	Older & Retired
male 2	Upscale	Middle Class	Working Class & Lower Income	Older & Retired
male 3	Upscale	Middle Class	Working Class & Lower Income	Older & Retired
male 4	Upscale	Middle Class	Working Class & Lower Income	Older & Retired
male 5	Upscale	Middle Class	Working Class & Lower Income	Older & Retired
male 6	Upscale	Middle Class	Working Class & Lower Income	Older & Retired
female 1	Upscale	Middle Class	Working Class & Lower Income	Older & Retired

female 2	Upscale	Middle Class	Working Class & Lower Income	Older & Retired
female 3	Upscale	Middle Class	Working Class & Lower Income	Older & Retired
female 4	Upscale	Middle Class	Working Class & Lower Income	Older & Retired
female 5	Upscale	Middle Class	Working Class & Lower Income	Older & Retired
female 6	Upscale	Middle Class	Working Class & Lower Income	Older & Retired

Marital Status
Circle One for each category that applies

	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined
male 1	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined
male 2	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined
male 3	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined
male 4	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined
male 5	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined
male 6	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined
female 1	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined
female 2	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined
female 3	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined
Female 4	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined
Female 5	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined
Female 6	Single, Separated, and Divorce w/ children	Single, Separated, Divorce w/o children	Married w/ children	Married w/o children	Undetermined

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