DIVERSITY IN U.S. MASS MEDIA

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WILEY-BLACKWELL
DIVERSITY IN
U.S. MASS
MEDIA
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Diversity in US Mass Media was conceived by one of its authors during the first semester in which she was teaching a course on “Media and Diversity” at her university. She perceived a need for a book that attempted to comprehensively cover the various areas associated with representations of diversity within the mass media. Many outstanding books exist that cover issues related to media, gender, ethnicity, and class. For the most part, however, they are edited books that cover a wide array of areas but do not necessarily flow in and out of each other. This book has endeavored to show consistencies as well as differences in media representations of minority groups in the United States.

The number of research studies addressing diversity within mass media has grown over the years with the increasing awareness that inequities in portrayals and coverage of various groups still remain an important issue. This book refers to many of the well-known studies on this topic and also presents some original research and observations that have been provided by the book’s authors. Although the authors have made strenuous efforts to be uniform in the writing across the chapters in terms of themes and topics covered, some variations do exist, of course, because of the differing subject matter and the extent to which the phenomenon being discussed has been researched within scholarly circles and among practitioners. For example, in the African American and Hispanic chapters, we present discussions of how these groups have been represented in music and have used music and radio as a channel of communication. The amount of research conducted on this topic with regard to these two groups is quite large, and not to include it would have been negligent. Similar research pertaining to Native Americans, Arab Americans, and Asian Americans, does not exist, however, and so this topic was not discussed in these chapters. Another example in terms of the variation in presentation is with regard to gender. The fact that years of research pertaining to mass media and gender have produced large quantities of studies and insight in this area prompted the decision by the authors to provide two separate, but related chapters on gender. In sum, decisions regarding which areas to cover in the chapters were driven by the importance of the topics as they related to the specified social groups and the amount of pertinent existing research.
We hope that the readers of this book will approach it with a critical eye. While introducing the material, the authors encourage readers also to question what is being presented and explore the extent to which they agree with the perspectives that are described. This book has been written with many examples included to help illustrate the concepts and perspectives discussed; however, readers should consider alternate examples from their own media use that support or contradict those included. We hope that the book will enlighten but also evoke further important questions that need to be considered at the personal and broader social level.

Several people need to be thanked for their individual input into the fruition of this book. The authors would especially like to extend their appreciation to the anonymous reviewers of this book and the tireless work of development editor Deirdre Ilkson. Because of their suggestions and insight, the book is a much stronger one. Special thanks also go to editor Elizabeth Swayze and editorial assistant Margot Morse for helping us not lose track of what needs to be done to get the book published and for their encouraging words and publishing knowledge. Additionally, gratitude is extended to our project manager Alec McAulay for his sharp editing skills and assistance with the book’s production, Arlene Naranjo and Justin West for their Spanish-language translations that appear in Chapter 5, and Jae Hee Park for his organizing of the book’s reference list.

The first author of this book, Catherine Luther, would also like to express her heartfelt thanks to her husband, Yosh, and her two boys, Gennick and Jovan, for allowing her to devote an enormous amount of time researching for and writing the book. Their patience and understanding were unsurpassed. Her boys were terrific in providing humor and fun during her breaks away from the book. It was a great stress relief.

Carolyn Lepre, this book’s second author, would like to express her unending gratitude to her husband, Todd, and her parents Jim and Jackie; her colleagues at Marist College, particularly Shannon Roper who was especially helpful during the final editing process; and the rest of her family and friends for their love, humor, and constant support. She would especially like to thank her twin daughters, Sarah and Ainsley, for their endless supply of hugs, kisses, and giggles, and for putting up with all the long evenings and weekends that she spent working instead of playing with them.

While working on this text, the book’s third author, Naemah Clark, moved twice, lived abroad, sold a home, bought a home, and moved from the University of Tennessee to Elon University. One of the few constants was the patience, encouragement, and humor of her co-authors. For them, she is grateful. She would also like to thank her family – Kacie, Kam, Betty, and Ken – for their unending suggestions of song lyrics, movie clips, and magazine titles.
INTRODUCTION

Within the past few years, each of you has participated in at least one common activity: completing college applications. Besides writing your essays, acquiring your transcripts, and securing your letters of recommendation, you likely had to complete a personal information form, which, along with demanding your name, address, and social security number, asked you to check the boxes that indicated your gender and your race or ethnicity. Did your pen pause over those boxes before you marked a particular one? Did you consider leaving the boxes empty? Did you wonder why the questions were relevant?

Universities and colleges collect the information as a way of measuring the extent of “diversity” within their institution. Over the last decade, for various political, social, and even economic reasons, a huge push to promote diversity not only in classrooms, but also in workplaces has been evident. But what exactly is meant by the word diversity? Diversity is commonly defined as being “composed of differing elements or qualities,”¹ and more specifically, in the context of social groups, the concept of diversity embraces the ideals of acceptance and respect, and an understanding that groups are made up of unique individuals.

When regarding diversity within the context of mass media, it is important to consider the extent to which an array of representations of individuals or social groups are being presented and the degree to which a multiplicity of voices are being heard or reflected. One must question how individuals and social groups are being portrayed and the underlying reasons for certain patterns of portrayals. Research has shown that the mass media have played an important role in contouring how individuals perceive and feel about themselves and about others.² Every day, individuals make quick judgments about others based on race or ethnicity,
Introduction

gender, disabilities, sexual orientation, class, and age. These judgments, whether fair or unfair, accurate or inaccurate, are based on information, gathered not only over years of experience and interactions with family, friends, and other social networks, but also from the constant bombardment of media images and messages that most humans encounter from an early age. This bombardment is almost unavoidable. For instance, though an individual may choose not to own a television in his or her own home, televisions are commonplace in doctors’ offices, at airports, and at restaurants.

Exploring and discussing media representations of social groups can be quite complicated. Clear-cut social groups actually do not exist. They run across each other, with each individual a composite of various social groups. For example, you might be a Hispanic lesbian female college student whose family background is upper-middle class. Which part of your identity is most important in defining you is really your decision. Nevertheless, as a society, we tend to identify individuals with a main social group. So, although you might believe that your identity of being a female college student is most important to you, another person may consider that your main identity is that of a Hispanic individual.

Thus, one of the challenges in writing this book was to decide which social groups to focus on and how to avoid the tendency to oversimplify these social groups and disregard how they relate to each other. We decided to address the following major social group categories: race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, and class. For race/ethnicity, the book covers Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, Arab Americans, and Asian Americans. The selection includes groups that had the earliest experiences of underrepresentation or distorted portrayals in the US mass media (i.e., Native Americans and African Americans) and also includes those groups that are growing in population in the United States and that are increasingly being represented in the mass media (i.e., Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Arab Americans). Many other social groups could have potentially been discussed in this book, including such groups as Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, Russian Americans, Italian Americans, lawyers, strippers, or doctors. The list can continue on. Think of this book as a starting point for you to go on and explore some of the other social groups in society.

As you move through the text, consider issues of intersectionality. It is our combination of identities that makes us individuals. Social groups do not experience things as a monolithic entity, reacting as one mind. One race, gender, age, or class of people will not respond as one mind to a media representation of their group. As you read about the media examples in this book, consider them critically, and make connections for yourself, in addition to considering the connections the authors of this text have tried to make for you between social groups. Think about how one depiction might be viewed positively by some and negatively by others, and how there are varying levels along this continuum. It is important to contextualize issues, placing one social group within the framework of others and to consider how diverse communities inform and intersect with one another.
To provide you with a basis for understanding why it is important to consider how social groups are being represented in the mass media, in the remaining sections of this introductory chapter we will first introduce you to the concept of social identity and then present you with a preliminary picture of why the social group categories we explore in the book should be examined.

**SOCIAL IDENTITY**

Social identity is a concept that came to the forefront in the 1960s and early 1970s, primarily due to increased concerns regarding group conflict. With events such as the US–Vietnam war, civil and women’s rights movements, and the Arab–Israeli conflicts, researchers began to make efforts to understand the roots of the conflicts and how identities might come into play in these group conflicts. Social psychologist Henri Tajfel was one of the more prominent scholars to delve into this question. He was interested in understanding the sources of group conflict and the role of social identity. In his influential work on social identity, Tajfel defines social identity as a self-concept that is based on group membership and the emotional attachments associated with that membership. When an individual identifies him/herself as a group member, his/her beliefs, interests, and actions tend to become aligned with those of the group.

Social identity develops as a social process whereby people not only self-categorize themselves, but the people around them as well. Humans have a natural drive to categorize or partition the world into units in order to cut down upon and simplify the amount of information they need to deal with and process. They create schemas or interrelated conceptual units of information that help them encode, remember, and react to incoming information. What often results is the emphasis of differences between the schemas and a de-emphasis of differences within them. In terms of the categorization of people, the same process occurs. Individuals have an inclination to accentuate the shared qualities that they have with members of their own group, while stressing the differences they have with people belonging to other groups. What results is a clear distinction between in-group members and out-group members.

As stated earlier, the number of groups to which an individual belongs and to which identification takes place can be widespread. An individual’s social identity can be considered as being made up of multiple identities. Some of the core identities recognized by researchers include gender, age, racial/ethnic, sexual orientation, national, religious, and class, with many of these identities intersecting. Given the understanding that identities are developed through a social process, one can see the potential role of mass communication in influencing the development of each of these identities. Through mass communication, individuals can be exposed to information related to their identities. The information can play a part in creating, reinforcing, modifying, negotiating or adding to identities.
RACIAL/ETHNIC IDENTITY

When discussing the social inequities that exist within societies and between nations, one of the most often discussed underlying reasons for the inequities is race or ethnicity. In such discussions, the terms race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably even though in actuality they are distinct.

Race was originally understood as a classification of individual genetics. An assumption was made that if a person were of a particular geographic origin, he or she would have certain physiological characteristics. With a better awareness of the variance that exists across individuals, the categorization of individuals based on biology was recognized as unrealistic. Several scholars from the social scientific community and the humanities called for the entire abandonment of the term “race.” Instead, many have called for the use of the term “ethnicity” instead.

Ethnicity encompasses one’s own heredity, national origin, and culture (i.e., beliefs, norms, values associated with one’s own heritage). The word combinations often found in terms of individual background (e.g., African American, Japanese American, Arab American) are reflective of this. They highlight an acknowledgement of not only the citizenship but also the deeper cultural background of the individual. In other words, the combined term assumes that Arab Americans share cultural norms found in Arab culture and in American homes. Clearly, ethnicity is a much more fluid concept than race.

Even with efforts to eradicate the term race and replace it permanently with the term ethnicity, usage of race persists. Which term is the proper term to use remains a point of controversy. As such, the term “race” is still used not only by the US government, but also by private and public institutions to identify individuals. The federal government assumes that individuals who are defined as a specific race may come from different ethnic backgrounds. By the same token, those who come from a particular ethnic origin may be of any race. Because both race and ethnicity are used in existing literature, both of these terms will also be used in this book.

Race/ethnicity is an important and frequently sensitive part of our broader social identity. With globalization and the advancement of communication technology, more individuals have the opportunity to encounter individuals from other races or ethnic backgrounds either firsthand or through a mediated source such as the mass media. Thus, it is crucial to nurture a greater understanding and appreciation of the diversity of individuals that make up the world populace.

In terms of the United States, with the increase of immigrants from certain sectors of the world, the racial/ethnic landscape has been dramatically changing over the last few decades (see Table 1.1). According to the US Census Bureau, the populations of Asians and Hispanics are growing at faster rates than any other racial ethnic group. In the 1970 Census, 9.6 million individuals reported being Hispanic. This figure grew to 35.3 million by the 2000 Census, and to 50.6 million by 2010⁹ – 1 American in six is Latino. The US Census Bureau projects that by the year 2050,
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132.8 million individuals living in the United States will be of Hispanic origin, representing one-third of the total US population. The Asian population is projected to grow to 33.4 million by 2050, which would represent about a 213 percent increase from the year 2000. As a proportion of the US population, the Asian population is expected to grow to 8 percent from the 3.8 percent figure provided in the 2000 census.

The number of people who identify themselves as biracial or multiracial has also been rapidly on the rise. This growth is significant considering that for some time in the history of the United States the mixing of races, especially between Whites and non-Whites, was frowned upon, and children from biracial or multiracial backgrounds often had to endure ridicule. In fact, legislation prohibiting the marriage or even sex between individuals of different races (anti-miscegenation legislation) had been in place in the United States for hundreds of years until the US Supreme Court overturned it in 1967.\(^7\) The 2000 US Census was the first to recognize multiracial individuals by providing people with the option of choosing multiple racial backgrounds.

With such fluctuations in the racial/ethnic makeup of the United States, it is important to understand how these groups have been historically and are currently represented in the mass media. After all, it is often through the mass media that understandings or misunderstandings are brought about regarding the different racial/ethnic communities.

### GENDER IDENTITY

Many people tend to view gender as something you are born with. Gender, however, is distinct from biological sex. It is a social construction generated within a particular cultural context. From a very young age, individuals learn the roles and attributes that are associated with males and females.\(^{10}\) If resistance surfaces against

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**Table 1.1: Population Size by Race and Ethnicity: 1980 and 2009 Comparison.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>2009</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>188,371,622</td>
<td>244,298,393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>26,495,025</td>
<td>39,641,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native</td>
<td>1,420,400</td>
<td>3,151,284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian and Pacific Islander</td>
<td>3,500,439</td>
<td>14,592,307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>14,608,673</td>
<td>48,419,324</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


these accepted roles or attributes, discomfort or even hostility toward the resistance may result. The opposition is looked upon as an affront to the societal or cultural beliefs that exist regarding gender.

Those individuals who represent the opposition might be ridiculed or ostracized as being different. In some cases, a new category might even be created to explain those people who do not quite fit into the established gender categories. For example, when men began to outwardly express interest in designer clothing, and skin and hair products, a new label was created to describe those who had broken away from the traditional conceptions of masculinity. Thanks to media attention, the label “metrosexuals” quickly caught on. Identifying British soccer star David Beckham as a metrosexual because of his penchant for fashion and cosmetics, writer Mark Simpson describes metrosexuals in the following manner:

The typical metrosexual is a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that’s where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight, or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference.11

In Simpson’s description, it can clearly be seen how an attempt is made to create a new category of men who do not quite fit in with the societal notions of masculinity.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that just as societies and cultures evolve so too do our notions of masculinity and femininity. Though these notions have changed some over time in the United States, traditional views are still quite widely held. For instance, masculine qualities include being strong, ambitious, successful, aggressive, rational, and emotionally controlled. Feminine qualities include being nurturing, sensitive, thin, emotionally expressive, deferential, physically attractive, and concerned with people and relationships. Since gender is learned, not biologically coded, media messages, along with other societal sources, contribute to how individuals define themselves.

Gender scholar Julia T. Wood notes that just because social meanings of gender are taught does not mean individuals passively receive cultural meaning.12 Choices are made whether to accept or reject messages and whether to reinforce gender norms or to step outside them. When people choose to step outside accepted social boundaries, they tend to provoke change in societal views. For example, years ago, many would have looked down upon women who played basketball on a team in the United States. Now, however, many girls and women are encouraged to be actively involved in the sport, and there are even professional basketball teams under the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA). Still, female sports are not universally or wholeheartedly accepted. Media coverage of the WNBA is relegated to cable, while NBA coverage is provided on the major broadcast networks. Even in the Olympics, men’s basketball is given more airtime than women’s basketball.
In one study on the 2000 Summer Olympics, only two minutes was given to the US women’s team, whereas over two hours of coverage was provided to the men’s team. The idea the mass media are, perhaps inadvertently, conveying is that women’s basketball is not worth the viewer’s (and, as a result, advertiser’s) time or money.

SEXUAL IDENTITY

For the longest time in the United States, heterosexuality was considered the only norm, and homosexuality was viewed as abnormal. Homosexuality was deemed a mental illness, even by the medical profession, and the common thought was that individuals could and should be “cured” of the illness. It is against this social backdrop that individuals formed their sexual identity. It goes without saying that for homosexuals it was a time of personal turmoil both externally, at the social level, and internally, at the personal level. The mainstream belief of who they should be was counter to their own sense of self.

Through the social and political efforts of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, understandings regarding sexual orientation have advanced. Although still fighting an uphill battle, the LGBT community has found greater acceptance at the social and political level. For example, due to years of activism, several states in the United States have recently passed legislation recognizing same-sex marriages.

Signs of advancement of understandings regarding sexual orientation have also been noted in the mass media. Whereas mention of homosexuality was taboo in the early days of mass media, a policy later succeeded by a stream of negative coverage, positive depictions and more well-rounded images can now be seen in much content.

AGE IDENTITY

People create schemas based on chronological age which then become a major part of our own social identity as well. We tend to adopt cultural notions regarding what type of language pattern or behavior is appropriate for certain age groups. Age-based schemas can influence whether a person’s talents, contributions, and feelings are acknowledged. Psychologist Becca Levy notes that age schemas are internalized at a young age, often as young as 4 years old, long before they are relevant, and are constantly reinforced throughout a lifetime. Further complicating these schemas, both of older as well as of younger people, are media representations. Actress Doris Roberts, who is in her 70s, testified before the Senate Special Committee on Aging in the fall of 2002 to drive home this point. At the hearing
she noted, “My peers and I are portrayed as dependent, helpless, unproductive, and demanding rather than deserving. In reality, the majority of seniors are self-sufficient, middle-class consumers with more assets than most young people, and the time and talent to offer society.”

Just like the other social identities discussed in this book, age complicates how an individual is perceived. Though no two people are alike, our learned schemas teach us to expect certain things about certain groups of people. For instance, if an individual was watching a man perform complicated stunts on a skateboard, that individual might think, “Wow, that’s impressive!” If that individual then approached the man to get a closer look and saw that the man appeared to be in his 50s, the individual’s impression of the skateboarder might dramatically change. The individual might encounter a bit of a disjuncture in thought processes. People tend not to expect a 50-year-old man to be doing stunts on a skateboard, simply because of the schemas that have been created for men in that age group. Another example is the reaction that actor Ashton Kutcher and actress Demi Moore received when they initially announced that they were dating. Because of the 15-year age difference, people were surprised by the pairing and even voiced expectation that the relationship would never last. The reverse was true. The two married and are now mainstays on Hollywood red carpets.

As baby boomers (i.e., those individuals born during the post-World War II years) age, attempts have been made to revise some of the standard cultural notions associated with old age. For example, the phrase, “40 is the new 30” or “50 is the new 40” can be heard. Such phrases really are attempts to change cultural ideas regarding age brackets. As with the other core identities, however, changes in cultural notions regarding age often entail a gradual process. The mass media can play a large role in bringing about or resisting the changes.

**DISABILITY IDENTITY**

Cartoonist John Callahan drew a cartoon showing three people: the first two are shown walking with question marks above their heads; the third person is shown in a wheelchair, also with a question mark above his head, but in the form of the symbol for disability. What Callahan, who became a quadriplegic at the age of 21 as a result of injuries received in a car accident, and who passed away in 2010 at the age of 59, was conveying through this cartoon is that individuals with disabilities are often defined by their disability. In other words, the disability becomes the only social identity for that individual.

Our cultural ideas about disability influence how we view and make judgments about people with disabilities. In certain cultures, disability is perceived as an embarrassment, something that should be hidden from public view. In other cultures, people with disabilities are considered as different, but not inferior to other individuals. Both cultural notions can be found in the United States.
CLASS IDENTITY

Every society is divided by certain social stratifications. One form of stratification is socioeconomic class. The socioeconomic class to which individuals belong often shapes how others view them and how they define themselves. People tend to associate certain communication styles, fashion, food, and recreational choices with each class. For example, you might associate champagne and caviar with upper-class individuals, while linking beer and hot dogs to the lower class. Why are such associations made? They might be loosely based on reality, but many are social constructions often influenced by the mass media.

Studies suggest the mainstream mass media present images or perspectives of the upper class or middle class often but the lower class infrequently. When the lower class is portrayed, the depictions are often negative in nature. For example, the poor often are shown as lazy or unmotivated and personally responsible for their own class position. Such negative portrayals or outright omissions can be problematic. If the images are negative, it is difficult to evoke compassion or understanding from the consumers of those images. If images are absent, viewers might come away with the impression that an insignificant number of individuals actually are poor. The impact of this faulty impression could have a direct impact on social services or legislation designed to help those who are financially underprivileged. If individuals believe the population of low-income families in the United States is lower than it actually is or have negative attitudes toward the poor, then they might be less likely to support services or legislation designed to help that social group.

ORGANIZATION OF BOOK

Your professor may reorganize the chapter order of this book to suit the needs of your class, but the authors have laid out a road map designed to help you navigate the complex history and themes inherent in studying media representations of diversity.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the major theoretical frameworks that have bracketed discussion of mass media representations of social groups. Introduced are frameworks not only from the cultural theoretical realms, but also from the social scientific tradition. Chapter 3 focuses on the representations of Native Americans, the first group in the United States to have their people portrayed in disparaging ways by those in socially dominant positions. Chapter 4 provides an overview of representations of African Americans, another group that had early experiences of domination and unfair media portrayals. Chapter 5 explores the representations of Hispanics, a growing ethnicity in the United States. Chapter 6 discusses the representations of Arabs and Arab Americans, a group that also is steadily growing in the United States and that has encountered acrimonious mass media depictions
because of domestic and international politics dealing with US–Middle East relations. Chapter 7 explores another group that has experienced varying portrayals impacted by domestic and international politics, Asians and Asian Americans.

Following a focus on race/ethnicity, the book will turn its attention toward other demographic categories beginning with gender. Because of the breadth of research that is available on the subject, two chapters are devoted to gender (Chapters 8 and 9), and explorations of the representations of men and women, as well as notions of masculinity and femininity are discussed. Chapter 10 examines representations of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and the transgendered, a group with an ever-growing political and social voice. This is followed by a chapter discussing age (Chapter 11), and the representations of older people as well as teenagers, and a chapter on disability (Chapter 12), a group with a long history of virtual invisibility in the media.

As you read the book consider how membership in the social groups discussed in each of the aforementioned chapters influence the social construction of class, the focus of Chapter 13. Chapter 14 discusses the overall progress the mass media industry has made in addressing issues of diversity. As you will see in reading the chapter, in recent years the mass media industry has taken concrete steps to address some of the concerns regarding representation of social groups and to increase the diversity within their content and their professional organization as well. The final chapter of this book, Chapter 15, provides a general conclusion to the previous chapters and broadens the discussion to what might lie ahead of us in terms of media and diversity. The consequences of media representations are highlighted, including the impact of such representations on individual self-concepts. The chapter also presents information concerning how minority groups have taken steps to create their own mass media in order to promote images that they believe are more representative of their own group. The role of the Internet in either promoting or discouraging diversity is additionally discussed. Also, at the end of the book, look for the Digging Deeper section that is designed to provide research paper topics along with points of synergy throughout the text. These pages are brief but will help to connect the dots and point out where patterns have formed. While this section is helpful after you have read the book, you may also want to dive into this section before reading the chapters as it foreshadows key elements found throughout the entire text.

In this book, attempts were made to approach subjects from diverse perspectives. As you move through it, consider the discussion questions and boxes, and evaluate the meaning and impact of the information in each chapter as it relates to your own personal experiences. Only through an understanding of how social groups are represented through the mass media can society become better equipped to evaluate the mediated messages that confront us on a daily basis and work on the task of social acceptance and understanding. Once individuals are able to effectively evaluate these messages and decode messages that contain misinformation or exaggerations, they are in a better position to evaluate, make judgments, and ultimately, gain understanding about groups and individuals who are different from them.
Reflection Questions and Thoughts to Consider

1. The social importance placed on certain identities has waxed and waned with the passage of time. Consider US mass media history. Do you believe certain identities (e.g., religious, sexual, gender) were given more notice within the mass media during specific time periods than in other periods?

2. Consider your own identities. Which identity or identities do you believe is most important to you? Why do you think that is the case?

3. How would you think or feel if you saw a little boy playing with a Barbie doll or heard about a young girl attempting to try out for her school’s football team? Would you feel awkward or taken aback? Would the behavior come as no surprise? What do you believe are the root causes of your reaction?

4. Think of the area in which you were raised. Have you noticed a change in the racial/ethnic make-up of your area within the past 10 years? If notable changes have taken place, how has the local media addressed or taken advantage of these changes?

Notes


7 Hobbs and Stoops, 72.


13 C.A. Tuggle, Suzanne Huffman, and Dana S. Rosengard, “A Descriptive Analysis of NBC’s


15 Dittmann, 50.


Scholars who study mass media representations of social groups tend to adhere to one of two main theoretical perspectives. The first perspective is social psychological and tends to place emphasis on understanding media representations through empirical means, often relying on a systematic content analysis of media material. The second draws from a more critical or cultural perspective with a concentration on how meaning is generated by the mass media. An in-depth, qualitative analysis is often preferred such as a textual or a discourse analysis. Both perspectives offer a wealth of information regarding how groups of individuals in a society are consistently portrayed and the potential underlying reasons for their portrayals. This chapter will review the major theoretical concepts that fall under each perspective. While other concepts exist, the ones chosen for review here are those that frequently appear in articles and books that seek to understand media images of social groups and their impact on the public.
MASS MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS: SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Researchers adopting a social psychological perspective attempt to understand existing patterns of media representations of social groups by striving to make observations based on agreed methods of systematic inquiry that they believe will ensure objectivity. When describing human thoughts about individuals or groups of individuals, they often speak in terms of the cognitive schemas created around the individual or group in question or the stereotypes that evolve from the schemas. As described in Chapter 1, cognitive schemas are interrelated conceptual units of information. They assist individuals in coherently organizing information. Humans naturally want to predict the behaviors of others. Schemas are thought to be one way of allowing such predictions to take place. When these schemas are perceived useful in grouping and understanding individuals, they are often communicated to other individuals and become stereotypes.¹

A stereotype can be defined as beliefs about characteristics or attributes of a social group. In his influential book, Public Opinion, Walter Lippmann asserted that stereotypes were basically “pictures in our head” and that they were necessary in order to take our complex environment and impose some form of order upon it.² Since that rudimentary description was first proposed in 1922, several social psychological studies have emerged supporting Lippmann’s assertions. Researchers have found that people’s ability to process information is limited and that stereotypes act as a heuristic device or a short-cut to reduce the amount of information that bombards people on a daily basis.³ In other words, stereotypes are a natural part of the categorization process that takes place within the human brain. Regardless of the fact that stereotypes can be viewed as a normal part of cognition, one still has to question why certain stereotypes exist and others do not. Why, for example, is a belief that women have small feet not a stereotype? Of course women’s feet come in all sizes, but people generally think that women have smaller feet in comparison to men. This, however, is not considered to be a stereotype. Is it because it is not socially relevant and the mass media have not zeroed in on this belief?

Communication researchers have long recognized that communication, especially mass communication, is a key player in the formations of stereotypes. Several mass communication theories based on social psychology have been used to understand how stereotypes evolve and how they potentially impact on social knowledge. The following are some of the more frequently used theoretical frameworks that help uncover the types and influences of social categories or stereotypes that are found in mass media.

Framing

Framing is a process in which a perceived reality is organized in such a way that certain aspects of the reality are stressed, while others are de-emphasized, leading to
a particular definition or understanding of the social world. One of the founders of the concept of framing, sociologist Erving Goffman, proposed that every individual engages in producing mental schemas or frames that enable them to efficiently identify and interpret information. Often these frames are unconsciously created and evolve over time to help people make sense of their environment and whatever changes might occur in that environment. Goffman further proposed that the mass media often promote the development of frames and how individuals use frames. As part of his research, Goffman focused on the types of gender frames frequently found in advertising and asserted that the frames found in advertising often mirror and reinforce dominant societal views. Among his findings was that women in advertisements were often framed as holding subordinate career roles and as emotionally withdrawn.

He also found that in advertisements featuring both men and women, connotations regarding what society deems to be appropriate gender interactions were frequently conveyed through framing. For example, if a woman and man were presented in an advertisement, the woman was usually situated underneath or below the man, while the man towered over her or embraced her in a protective fashion. Such framing suggested men were in the dominant position in society.
Several researchers have since replicated and even expanded on Goffman’s frame analysis of gender in advertising. Media researcher Katharina Linder, for example, analyzed advertisements featured in *Time* magazine and *Vogue* magazine over a 47-year time span from 1955 to 2002 and found that few significant changes had been made in gender framing. Women were often shown as subordinate to men and more objectified than men. In other words, the women were found to be secondary in relation to men and were presented with less clothing. The author concluded that the images in advertisements, through framing, reinforced the imbalance in social power between men and women.

Journalists have also been found to rely on framing in their work. Within the context of news, communication and political science professor Robert Entman defines framing as “the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation,” and writes that the end effect of framing is the encouragement of readers or audiences to “think, feel, and decide in a particular way.”

Although journalists are taught to strive for objectivity, because they are often under time pressures to create gripping stories in a time-efficient manner, they too fall back on accessing their mental schemas and engage in the process of framing. When certain frames are consistently presented in the news, they tend to be elevated to widespread themes that are often absorbed by and influence people in all sections of society.

Many researchers who have examined frames in mainstream news stories have found that the frames tend to echo the perspectives of those who hold political and economic power in society. Inequities or discrimination that are found in society can be reflected in the news stories. For example, several studies have found that crime stories tend to highlight those crimes that are carried out by African American males, despite the fact that the majority of crimes are carried out by Anglo Americans. Media scholars Travis Dixon and Daniel Linz analyzed the racial makeup of perpetrators of crime as shown in local television news in the Los Angeles area over a 20-week period and compared those findings with the race of criminal perpetrators as reported by California’s Department of Justice. The researchers found that television news did not reflect the figures shown in the crime reports. African Americans were more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators of crime than to actually be arrested (see Table 2.1).

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<th>Race</th>
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<th>TV Perpetrators (%)</th>
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