

Connecting Television Network News to the College Aspirations Of African American High School Students

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Abstract

Television news impacts individuals' perceptions of themselves. Compared to local news, network news has a greater impact on its audiences due to its national presentation of issues and current events. Previous studies demonstrate that network news' portrayals of African Americans increase the endorsement of African American stereotypes and racial attitudes within society. Since African American adolescents watch more television than any other demographic, increased exposure to television network news programming may affect their college aspirations and self-concepts.

This experiment investigates whether viewing television network news programming affects the college aspirations of African American high school students. An online survey was administered to 50 students, predominantly African American, recruited from Crenshaw High School in Los Angeles, California. Students viewed two television network news packages and responded to follow-up questions on the packages. One package focused on a societal issue selected as most interesting to the subject, and the second featured President Barack Obama providing solutions to solve the societal issue. Results demonstrated subjects believed network news programming encouraged negative stereotypes towards African Americans, and network news programming that includes a successful African American providing solutions to societal issues increased college aspirations and self-concepts. Results also revealed that some African American adolescents' academic achievements caused their peers to ridicule their racial identity. This study encourages future discussions on stopping the endorsement of African American stereotype portrayals in network news, implementing media literacy into classrooms, and connecting African Americans' academic aspirations to their racial identity.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

Despite efforts to stop the endorsement of stereotypical portrayals of African Americans on television network news, there are still networks that are allowing this to continue. In fact, some researchers (Klein & Naccarato, 2003; Dixon & Lenz, 2000b) believe that ethnic misrepresentation on television news may result in a belief by viewers that the real world is similar to the television world. However, it should not take a disaster for journalism to seek a higher level of quality (Leger, 2003). News that is presented to audiences all over the world should already incorporate accuracy and reality as much as possible.

There are too many excuses for why these portrayals are continuing. For example, the most common explanations offered for minority misrepresentation are racism and economic gain. Some researchers (Klein & Naccarato, 2003; e.g. Romer et al., 1998) believe that stations participate in a policy of ethnic blame. They note that Whites own most of the mass media organizations; they influence news content, they want to portray their group favorably, and they blame people of color for their problems.

Network executives and news directors may refrain from stopping the endorsement of stereotypical portrayals of African Americans. Heider (2000) and Klein and Naccarato (2003) suggest that some stations and advertisers believe that this ethnic blame approach appeals to a largely White television news audience. They argue that news directors, who are mostly White, suffer from a condition known as “incognizant racism”—they are not intentionally racist but rather simply unaware of their own attitudes. Thus, news directors and executives may believe that the way they shape their news stories is accurate and just.

Consequently, if a viewer has little to no previous knowledge about an issue or situation being presented to them by television news, especially network news, then they are more likely to deem its portrayal true and plausible. Parker (1999) found many times viewers, especially adolescents, become involved vicariously with groups and situations with which they have had no experience. Parker also noted (1999) that since adolescents exhibit a short attention span, the messages and portrayals of individuals presented to them by television could affect behavior and intellectual development in school. Therefore, African American adolescents are facing and have faced a huge dilemma due to television network news. Since African American youth watch more television than any other youth group, they may often come across network news and interpret it as an indication of reality (Azocar, Dixon, & Casa 2003; Gerbner, 1990; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Conner, 2007; Paik & Comstock, 1994). They may not necessarily want to interpret network news programming in this manner, but they may not know the difference between the “reality” presented on television and the real “reality.”

More researchers and members of society are becoming concerned with the level of motivation African Americans exhibit toward doing well in high school and attending college, for many reasons. One reason is that African American adolescents are more likely to embrace the version of the world cultivated by television news and incorporate it into their view of reality (Gerbner, 1990; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Ward, 2004). Another reason is that studies have shown that African American students are not reaching the same academic levels of success as their White counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004b). These concerns are overwhelming and spark more catalysts for research studies on this issue. Despite efforts to close the achievement gap between African American and White students, the disparity in academic

performance still exists (Viadero & Johnston, 2000). As efforts have demonstrated that this issue is not being solved, more research studies should be conducted.

This research study aims to find out how, if at all, television network news portrayals of African Americans impact the academic achievement of African American adolescents as well as the number of students who choose to attend college.

### Definitions

Modern racism: “Modern racism has three major components: (a) Anti-African American affect or a general emotional hostility toward African Americans, (b) resistance to the political demands of African Americans, and (c) the belief that racism is dead and that racial discrimination no longer inhibits African American achievement” (Dixon 2008, Entman 1981, Entman 1992; McConahay 1986).

Network news: “Network news is news where foreign and domestic politics and policy compromise the bulk of the report” (Dixon, 2008; Entman 1994).

Racial prejudice: “Homogenizing and generalizing about the disliked outgroup and lumping most individual members of the outgroup together as sharing similar undesirable traits, while seeing one’s own group as a diverse collection of clearly differentiated individuals” (Entman, 1994; Katz and Taylor, 1988).

Stereotypes: “According to social cognition theorists who have advanced this paradigm, stereotypes are cognitive structures or categories that affect the encoding and processing of information, particularly information pertaining to groups to which the perceiver does not



belong, i.e. outgroups” (Azocar, Dixon, & Casas 2003; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hamilton & Troiler, 1986)

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to find a correlation between the viewing of television network news by African Americans and their college aspirations. If students watch coverage of a societal issue that interests them, then they may be more likely to study the issue in college to solve it.

This study also aims to find out whether the endorsement of stereotypical portrayals of African Americans on network news influences the level of interest African American adolescents have in attending college. African American adolescents are more likely to feel motivated by members of their own race who are benefiting society as well as encouraging them to solve societal issues. Television network news featuring successful and educated African Americans providing solutions to societal issues may motivate positive self-concepts and the college aspirations of African American adolescents.

### Importance of the Study

This study is important because it contributes evidence that television network news endorse stereotypical portrayals of African Africans and influence racial attitudes and perceptions within society. This study also addresses whether such portrayals connect to the college aspirations of African American adolescents and their educational needs. If a model could be constructed that explained network news’ impact on African American youth, then it might be possible to develop and implement strategies to increase the number of them who

attend college.

There is scarce information on the impact that the media, specifically television network news, has on minority youth (Conner, 1997; Ward, 2004) and few studies on television focus on African American children and adolescents directly (Conner, 1997; Stroman, 1991). Results obtained from this experiment could encourage networks and news directors to think more carefully about the portrayal of African Americans in their news programming.

This study could also inform African American minorities, parents, educators, and policymakers about the impact of network news on the college aspirations of African American youth. African American youth and their parents could benefit from understanding and recognizing that television network news often endorses stereotypes of African Americans within their programming that could lead to inaccurate notions and misperceptions. Educators could be informed so that they teach students to steer away from the concepts and ideas television network news often endorses about all African Americans' capabilities and possible successes. Television networks executives and news directors can become aware of how certain programming affects every race in differently ways and can change their programming to present the races as accurately as possible. Finally, policymakers can monitor network news more and implement more restrictions on the programming that it endorses in order to protect youth and society from the inaccuracies the news may try to present to them.

Research Question and Hypotheses

Primary Research Proposal Question: Does viewing television network news correlate with African American high school students' college aspirations?

Primary Hypothesis: African American adolescents who watch coverage on television network

news of a societal issue that interests him or her is more likely to want to become educated on that issue or subject by attending college.

### Other Hypotheses

In my research study, I am aiming to demonstrate results for several other hypotheses as well:

H2: African American adolescents who want to attend college after viewing coverage on television network news of a societal issue that interests him or her are more likely to work harder in high school compared to students who do not intend to go to college.

H3: African American adolescents' perceptions of the portrayals of African Americans on network news will correlate with the opinions they form in regards to members of their race.

H4: African American adolescents who view more successful, educated African Americans on network news are more likely to have positive self-concepts, increasing their interest in attending college.

H5: African American adolescents who work harder in school are more likely to report fear of being ridiculed by their African American peers for being "too white".

H6: African American adolescents who fear being ridiculed by their peers for being "too white" are more likely to have negative self-concepts and negative feelings toward school.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### African Americans and Television Network News

Television has become the window to the world for most individuals. It affects the self-identify and the beliefs of all audiences who view and cultivate the realities portrayed (Conner, 2007; Fujioka, 1999; Gerbner et al., 1986; Gerbner et al., 2002; Greenberg, 1988; Potter, 1986). Viewpoints on groups of people and events presented on television news especially impact the perceptions and beliefs held by society. These portrayals impact society's perceptions and beliefs due to the structure and presentation of each news story, which appears to present reality. Network news in particular has been found to distort portrayals of African Americans (Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Dixon, 2008; Entman, 1994; Gilens, 1996a, Gilens, 1996b). Thus, if television network news continue to endorse stereotypes and falsely portray African Americans, heavy viewers of network news could begin to believe the "realities" presented to be accurate. As a result, racial prejudices could rise within society.

Few studies have been conducted on the representations of African Americans on network news. However, those studies that have been conducted have found significant connections between the portrayals of African Americans and the racial attitudes society holds toward this minority group. An early study of network news conducted by Roberts (1975) found that African Americans were often associated with bussing and segregation, issues increasing racial prejudice in the White community, and also dispositions relegated to blue-collar roles or poverty. Roberts' study was significant in demonstrating that network news often presents African Americans in situations and positions that do not reflect members of the group individually and accurately.

Other noteworthy studies on the portrayals of African Americans in network news continued in later decades. A study by Gilens (1992a, 1996a) found that African Americans were still associated with poverty and were beginning to be associated with lazy or pity-provoking states on network news. Furthermore, a study by Entman (1994) found that African Americans on network news were more likely than Whites to appear as perpetrators in drug and violent crime stories. The findings of Gilens and Entman noted that network news endorses stereotypical portrayals of African Americans. As Entman (1994) found, network news conveys narrower ranges of positive roles for blacks than for whites due to the way conventional journalistic norms and practices interact with political and social reality. Therefore, although Roberts's study demonstrated how African Americans were portrayed on network news during the 1970s, the studies conducted by Gilens and Entman further demonstrate that the situation did not change in later years. Instead, the negative portrayals continued and were as inaccurate in the 1970s as they were in the early 1990s.

Additionally, other studies found that African Americans were increasingly connected to crime within network news programming. In fact, African Americans are more often connected with criminality than are Whites (Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b; Entman & Rojecki, 2000). The more a viewer is exposed to an African American connected with crime, the more likely that viewer is to associate African Americans with crime. Each instance of exposure to a Black rather than a White criminal activates the stereotype of Black criminality, strengthening the cognitive association between Blacks and crime (Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Domke et al., 1999; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Shrum 1996). For heavy viewers of network news, these associations may become a strong perception of African Americans in their minds and the minds of non-African American viewers.

Recent studies conducted by Dixon, Azocar, and Casas (2003) demonstrated that over time, these portrayals associating African Americans with crime, poverty, and laziness may be regularly endorsed by network news, increasing negative racial attitudes within society. In fact, Dixon (2008) found that network news exposure was positively related to African American stereotype endorsement. These endorsements may also predict social reality perceptions based on the cultivation theory and cause people to perceive information based on their own preconceived notions or beliefs (Dixon, 2008; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 2002; Vidman & Rokeach 1974). Thus, selective exposure and perception could also increase negative racial attitudes in society.

The representation of African Americans on network news has a distinct psychological impact on audiences. Entman (1994) found that television network news affects the psyche of the majority and the minority through the stereotypical portrayals it presents of African Americans. African Americans in the news symbolize all Blacks in a way that singular representations of other groups, like Whites, do not (Entman, 1994). For example, Duke's (2000) study found that White viewers are often unaware of the racial biases and lack of minority portrayals and images in media. Consequently, if viewers are unaware of these portrayals, then it is more likely that they will deem stereotypical portrayals of African Americans to be accurate and reflective of reality now and in the future.

The African American community may also be impacted by television network news' stereotypical endorsements of members of their race. Representing 12% of the American populace (US Census bureau, 2004A), African Americans include the heaviest television viewers (Conner, 2007; Ward, 2004; Ward et al., 2005) with 13.9 million African American households having a television (Nielsen, 2008). Due to their high levels of consumption (Conner, 2007;

Greenberg et al., Viadero & Johnston, 2000), African Americans are more likely to feel ashamed of or even believe the stereotypes depicted of members of their race on television network news. African American adolescents are even more susceptible to these feelings.

#### African American Adolescents and the Impacts of Television Consumption

Television is the primary place where adolescents get their information. American youth spend an enormous amount of time watching television (Comer, Furr, Beidas, Babyar, Kendall, 2008) since 98% of American households have a television set (Croteau & Hoynes, 1997). Moreover, there is a television set in the bedroom of two-thirds of American youth between the ages of 8 and 18 (Gentile & Walsh, 2002; Roberts et al., 2004; Wartella, Heintz, Aidman, & Mazzarella, 1990). Constant viewing of television, especially television news, may often cause adolescents to believe that television news reflects reality. In many cases, television becomes a foundation for the understanding and comprehension of society (Conner, 2007; Cortes, 2005; Gerbner et al., 2002; Ward, Hansbrough, Walker, 2005). This is especially relevant because adolescents have impressionable minds.

Adolescents, like most television viewers, may believe television reflects their reality. Consuming many hours of television, adolescents are plagued with imagery that begins to define their reality (Conner, 2007; Duke, 2000; Sternheimer, 1998; Stroman, 1991; van den Broek, 2001). Since adolescents are also found not capable of fully processing the information from the small-screen tube (Conner, 2007; Sternheimer, 1998), concern arises about the content they are viewing. Adolescents in particular may not be aware of the inaccuracies in what they are viewing on television news.

There is also cause for concern if television content correlates with academic achievement, especially the academic achievement of African Americans. Despite perceptions that most youths watch the same amount of television, studies demonstrate that African American youth are the primary consumers of television, watching more television and news than White adolescents (Facts and Figures About Our TV Habit, n.d.; Ward, 2004; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). From these findings, authorities have begun to blame television as the source of adolescent insecurities (Hansen & Hansen, 2000) and failing levels of academic success (US Census Bureau, 2004b). Although significant studies have yet to determine if television, especially television news, has contributed to this achievement gap (Ball, Palmer, & Millward, 1986), some studies have shown that African American adolescents are more likely to rely on television to validate their understandings of the world, their peers, and themselves (Ward, 2004). Therefore, constant exposure to stereotypical or negative images could alter the self-confidence and academic achievements of minority viewers (Conner, 2007; Fujioka, 1999), especially if news programming is inaccurately portraying reality and groups of people. This raises the issue of how television news is depicting African Americans and how African American youth see themselves and their future based on what they see presented.

#### Television Consumption Affects African American Adolescents in Classrooms

The period of adolescence is often difficult due to the number of changes and the self-concepts an individual is beginning to form. In many cases, television plays a significant role in the development of adolescents' psychological and academic development, especially for African Americans, who tend to validate the world through television messages (Ward, 2004). Ball (1986) found that high school students who watched more television performed more poorly



in school than did students who watched less amount of television. Thus, the amount of television that is viewed could influence the academic achievement of students.

However, recent studies have shown parental guidance and monitoring of students as they watch television could improve their academic achievement. Ball, Palmer, and Millward (1986) discovered that children who spent more time watching television with their parents had professed having higher IQs. In fact, as adolescents grow older, parental involvement in the shaping of their thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes is essential for minimizing the impact of television messages (Gerbner et al., 1986; Conner 2007). Thus, parents can play a significant role in the level of success adolescents have in the classroom. In fact, Stroman (1991) found that adolescents, regardless of how much television they view, need a standard for viewing and a foundational understanding of how to view television, because television will be the educator if parents and other external factors are not accessible to balance the message of the medium. The messages of television may influence how students feel about themselves and either hinder or promote their self-concept or self-efficacy in the classroom.

Furthermore, studies have shown that adolescents often motivate one another to do well in school and in extracurricular activities. In Fisher's (1999) study, several students said they were encouraged to reach a higher level of academic achievement when their friends were doing likewise, especially when they were in the same classroom or work group. Consequently, a student's self-concept is often dependent on how he or she perceives himself or herself in relation to others (Bandura, 1986; Byrne, 1986; Conner, 2007 Pajares, 1996; Pajares & Schunk, 200). Students, especially African Americans, tend to feel more positive about achieving in school when they have higher self-concepts (Pajares, 1996; Pajares & Schunk, 2001). Thus, in many cases, students can influence their peers toward greater academic achievement.

Yet, adolescents can also be cruel to each other as well. Emerging evidence has demonstrated that African American students who are ridiculed by their peers as acting “too white” may sometimes withdraw from doing well academically. Those who do not want to be perceived as white or conforming to the ideas of society are more likely to not receive an education (Boyd 1997, p. 33). Although African American students may indeed have high aspirations for school achievement, they may actively resist the idea to avoid being ridiculed by peers, and therefore avoid working hard in school. As Fisher’s (1999) study found, African American students often have confidence in their academic ability; however, frequently their perceptions of their academic ability are not consistent with their performance. Instead they see value only in being educated in the ways of the streets and the hard-core urban environments in which they may live. They reject the ideas of mainstream society (Boyd 1997, p. 33) in hopes of not assimilating to a culture that takes away from the identity of African American individuals. As stated in *African Psychology* (p. 62, 1997), “the extent that the African American community has come under the control of the European American worldview has influenced Blacks to perpetuate a survival thrust that is ‘anti-Black’” and contradictory to the survival mechanisms they have taken from African culture (Baldwin 1984, 1985b; McGee 1973; Nolbes 1976; Williams 1976; Woodson 1969). Television has been shown to play a role in how African Americans see themselves as well.

Television often encourages African Americans to immerse themselves in White culture at the cost of their identity. As Boyd (1997) found, media and films have shown that if an African American desires to assimilate into American society, he or she may be forced to give up his or her own ethnic and cultural heritage (p. 85). However, television should show that African Americans can immerse themselves in different cultures, including through education, and not

lose their identities. As Fisher (1999) found, students want to be exposed to people in a variety of vocations for which the educational requirements range from high school diploma to college degree, and want to see these vocations presented as options—not vocational hierarchies. Thus, if television is exposing African American adolescents to African Americans who are educated and achieving a high level of success in society, then they will be more encouraged to succeed academically and to have more interest in attending college.

#### Television Affects the College Aspirations of African American Adolescents

Individuals form aspirations in order to guide the paths they choose to take in life. Aspirations are defined as strong desires or ambitions, as for advancement, honor, or level of success (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2008). Having direction toward an aspiration will allow an individual to take the steps necessary to achieve that goal. Youths tend to develop aspirations related to future careers. As Fisher found (1999), vocational choices of adolescents are made as early as grade school. Consequently, youths who are able to align aspirations with occupational ambitions achieve higher success in school. Studies (e.g. Alexander & Cook 1979; Hanson 1994; Kao and Tienda 1998) have found that youth often connect their educational goals to their career ambitions (Marini & Greenberger, 1978). By gaining success in the classroom, youth feel that they are more likely to obtain their career goals. Thus, youth who align their academic expectations with their career goals are more likely to avoid obstacles and disappointments in achieving them, according to Schneider and Stevenson (1999). They may also realize that in order to fulfill these career aspirations, they also need to form college aspirations.

Aspirations and expectations may also correlate with future outcomes. Although social researchers have focused primarily on the educational expectations of youths (e.g. Alexander and Cook 1979; Hanson 1994; Kao and Tienda 1998), and, to a lesser extent on their occupational ambitions (Marini and Greenberger 1978), Schneider and Stevenson (1999) suggest that well-matched expectations also play an important part in adolescents' outcomes, such as in attending college. Schneider and Stevenson (1999) found that it is the congruence between educational and career expectations that enables some students to be more successful in post-secondary education and early careers than others. Those who are able to align expectations earlier are also more likely to avoid obstacles and disappointments in achieving them (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999). The ability to shape these educational and occupational aspirations into plans to achieve them is also a crucial component of being able to realize high aspirations (Hoelter, 1982). High aspirations for adolescents correlate with such actions, like attending college.

For minority adolescents, especially those in urban areas, attending college and universities may not be as accessible or even an option. In fact, McKinnon's (2003) population report, conducted with the U.S. Census Bureau, revealed that 21.5 % of African American men and 21.1% of African American women ages 25 and over in 2002 had less than a high school degree, compared to 11% of White males and females. Television news may have an influence on these statistics since inner-city youth may consider several ideologies of success simultaneously (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999); however, television has been shown to impact their aspirations.

Moreover, minority youth tend to associate successful aspirations with images of areas where members of their race tend to greatly succeed, like sports, fashion, or music. Youths,

particularly males, may wish to become athletes in popular sports such as basketball or football, or desire to be involved in the music or fashion industries as either performers or designers (Carter 2005; Solomon 1992). These are careers that are portrayed as the result of talent or luck. Family, school resources, and academic achievement are not seen as necessary to become a sports star or a rapper, for instance (Carter 2005). Therefore, African American adolescents may not feel college is necessary for them to achieve their goals in life. As many scholars argue, low-income urban youth, particularly black males, often idealize careers related to professional sports or music because of the limited opportunity structure they perceive in other educational and career paths (Carter, 2005; Collins, 2004; Hoberman, 1997; Solomon, 1992; Staples, 1982). Unfortunately, this reality presented by television is not accurate, but many African Americans do not know this to be true.

Consequently, African Americans are less likely than Whites to attend four-year colleges, and they are also somewhat more likely to drop out once enrolled (Carnoy, 1995). According to his research, Carnoy (1995) found there are two explanation for this: “a second wave” of African Americans did not respond to the increased opportunities available to go to four-year colleges because a majority of African American adolescents are not motivated or not able to do well in school.

Other factors such as parents, teachers, neighborhood environments, and peers may also influence the aspirations African American adolescents form. In fact, these external stimuli are capable of altering the perceptions of children and adolescents when constructing their self-identity and self-esteem (Conner, 2005; Conner, 2007; Ward, 2004). Yet Stroman (1991) suggested that television has a higher capacity to construct the views of adolescents and adjust their ideologies about the world and their place in it. Depictions of African American celebrities

who have been successful without going to college and television news coverage that portrays African Americans as lazy, poor, criminal, and uneducated may also substantially shape the college aspirations of African American adolescents.

Television can also correlate with the academic achievement of African American adolescents in high school and in attending college. The effects of heavy television viewing in relation to academic achievement continue to be researched, and the amount of research available is sparse (Ball et al., 1986). In fact, the U.S. Department of Education (1994) found that television has a negative impact on the academic attainment of young people, specifically African Americans, whose levels of academic achievement have decreased substantially in the last few years (Viadero & Johnston, 2000). Although the portrayals and images presented on television news may also be responsible for the number and achievement levels of African Americans attending college, more extensive research must be conducted in order to find these correlations.

### Chapter 3: Media Theoretical Framework

This research study connects with several theories and hypothesis media frameworks .

#### Cultivation Theory

The cultivation theory was created in the 1960s, when there were only three major networks on American television: NBC, CBS, and ABC (Gerbner et al., 1986). Though more stations and channels exist today, Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986) argued that there is not a great amount of diversity of content; therefore, messages are not diversified, more developed, or more expanded.). The theory's concept originally stated that individuals who

spend more time viewing television tend to cultivate the normalized themes and embody them in their daily lives (Gerbner et al., 1986). However, scholars have criticized this theory (Greenberg, 1988; Potter (1986), and thus it has been revised to emphasize that the amount of cultivation is dependent upon the psychological state of the television consumer (Gerbner et al., 2002). Therefore, the mindset of the viewer while watching television correlates with their cultivation of television's messages.

The cultivation theory has several other factors that must be noted. For one, the cultivation effect is stronger when individuals are heavy viewers. The effect is also stronger when viewers are not critical of the messages, but watch television more (Shrum, 2002). Therefore, this extent of cultivation is often labeled the "cultivation differential" (Gerbner et al., 2002, p.47), since it is based on whether the person is a heavy viewer or light viewer (Gerbner et al., 2002). Finally, the theory is also not genre-specific, but pertinent to all genres (Gerber et al., 2002) Therefore, the more television a viewer watches, the more likely he or she will deem the images to be reality, like the stereotypes of African Americans on network news.

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## Drench Hypothesis

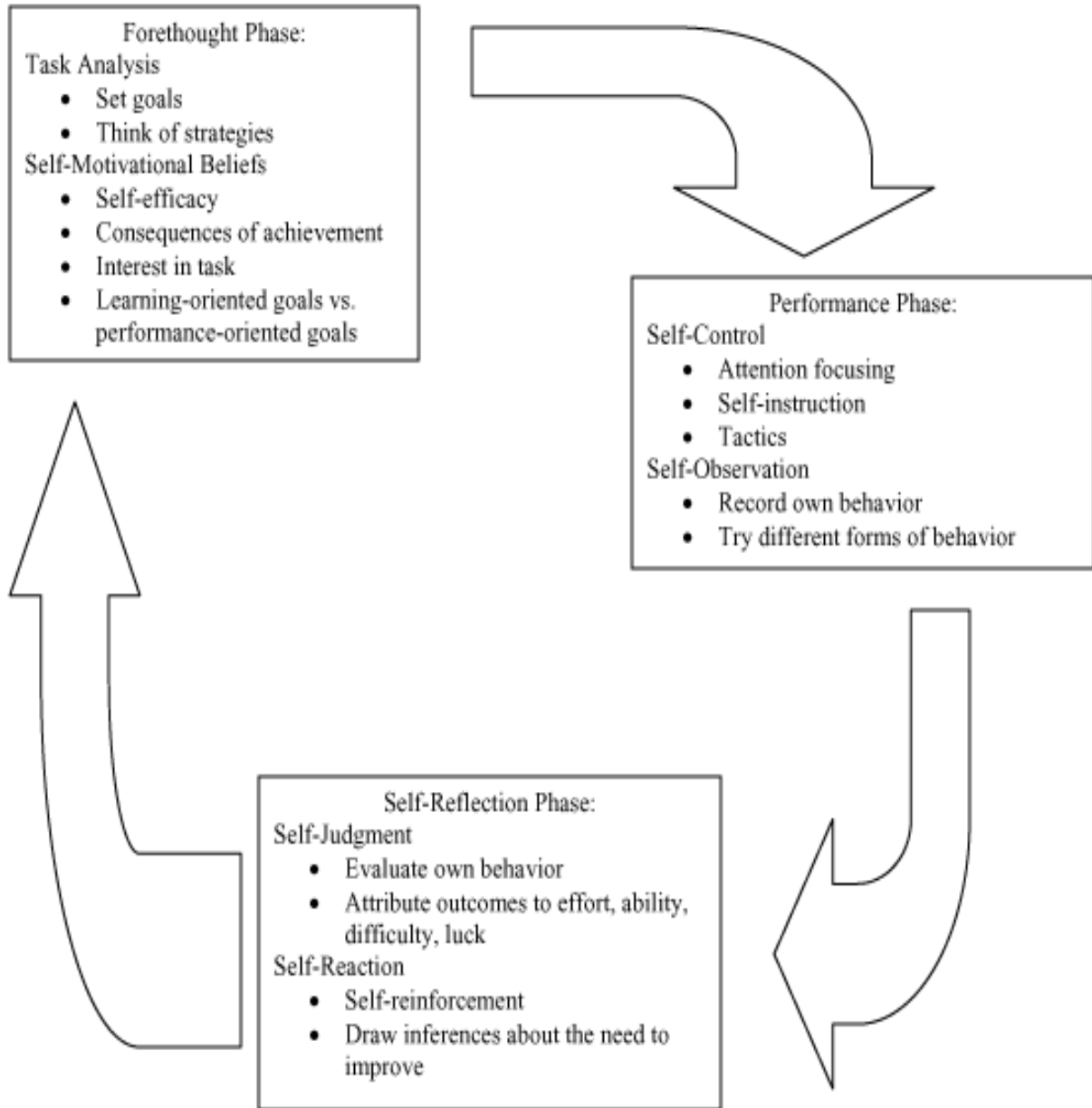
The counterhypothesis to cultivation analysis is the drench hypothesis. The drench hypothesis is opposite of the cultivation theory since it proclaims that the significance of characters on television has a greater impact than the how often certain characters are viewed (Greenberg, 1988). It posits that a single image on television can have a powerful effect on the viewer. Greenberg (1988) believed that the cultivation hypothesis had limited empirical support, “demeaned” the capabilities of TV viewers, and should not imply that all television portrayals will influence viewers in the same manner. Moreover, Greenberg believed that particular television portrayals may have a greater impact on a viewer than repetitive messages that are presented (Greenberg, 1988, Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Ward 2004). Hence, the psychological impact characters have on audiences may determine how much viewers deem these images to be reality. Mastro and Greenberg (2000) claimed that strong characters could create a firm basis for judging and viewing others and present acceptable societal behaviors. The drench hypothesis is similar to priming (planting prevailing content to viewers), because both allow the viewer to decide how much he or she will allow certain images or portrayals of individuals and groups to form his or her opinions.

However, some scholars criticized the drench hypothesis, stating that television did not provide enough exposure to variety for “multiple interpretations” (Oliver, 2002, p.517), that audiences often receive television messages allowing cultivation to occur (Shrum, 2002), and finally that repetitions are not powerful enough and not accurate enough to balance the concepts shown (Cortes, 2005). With many research studies continuously evolving around the drench hypothesis, more extensive research on African Americans’ stereotypical portrayals on network news could add to these media frameworks.

## Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory suggests that individuals assesses their encounters, beliefs, and perceptions in relation to other, sometimes dominant, beliefs and external factors and often measure themselves against such defined standards, which results in the construction of beliefs that ultimately influence their behavior. Social cognitive theory in relation to television viewing concludes, "vicarious learning via television takes place through a series of cognitive processes including attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation" (Fujioka, 1999, p.56). The mental state of the television viewer (expectations, memory, attitude, motivation, interpretation, relation to content) determines the extent to which information and messages are processed and stored (Cortes, 2005; Fujioka, 1999; Oliver, 2002; Shrum, 2002). Thus, both the mindset of the viewer and their processing of what they have seen on television have a substantial impact on their perception of the messages taken from the television program they have viewed and on their own self-concepts.

*Social Cognitive Theory Diagram* taken from *Psychology Applied to Teaching*, by Snowman and Biechler (1996)



### Chapter 3: Methods

**Participants:** 50 subjects were recruited from Crenshaw High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District. It is a school frequently cited for failing to receive accreditation (Rubin & Caldwell, 2006) and is located in a lower-class economic area with a majority African American populace. Subjects who took the survey were African American and enrolled in summer school. Students had failed at least one class prior to being in summer school. Thus, in order to advance to the next grade level, it was mandated that students had to take summer school. The combination of these distinctions suggested that the experiment would achieve a greater effect, since the subjects were previously not doing well in school.

**Experiment Design:** The experiment employed two network news packages ranging from one minute 30 seconds to three minutes 40 seconds in length. The first news packages viewed by subjects were assigned based on their responses to a prior question that assessed their level of interest in a variety of current political, environmental, and economic, educational, and healthcare issues. Each subject watched a video that was related to the issue that they selected as most interesting. The second newscast viewed by subjects was of President Barack Obama promising to solve the societal issue mentioned.

**Procedure:** The study was conducted using the website [www.qulatrix.com](http://www.qulatrix.com). Data was collected over a one-day period during the summer of 2009. Two classes were selected to complete the survey during class time. Students were given an hour and 30 minutes to take it, but subjects

took an average of 40 minutes to complete the survey. Qualtrics was used for construction and implementation of the survey, along with data collection.

Permission was obtained from the principal of the high school in order to conduct the experiment. The principal randomly selected two teachers with classroom sizes of 30 subjects to allow students take the survey.

Students were asked to receive permission from a parent or guardian if interested in taking the survey. Teachers distributed 60 youth assent and parent consent forms to students a day prior to the study. Teachers could not allow subjects to participate in the study if forms were not returned signed. Students who did not receive parental permission or chose not to take the survey were still compensated with pizza as a token of appreciation.

Interested subjects who returned signed forms voluntarily took the survey. Teachers took all subjects into the library computer lab of the high school in order to participate.

Teachers were instructed to not allow students to talk during the survey and to have all students wear headphones during the survey. The teacher gave students pieces of paper with the online survey website, and students were instructed to go to the site to complete the survey. Participants then voluntarily visited the survey website.

50 students actually went to the website. The teacher was not allowed to be present in the room while students took the survey. However, the teacher did check in with the students every 15 minutes to make sure the setting remained calm and quiet. Although it was possible for other students to go to different websites during the survey, the teacher said she did not witness this.

Students who went to the site were greeted with a welcome page that informed them of the study, explained that it was approved by the university, emphasized that all of the data was confidential, and stated that they could leave or skip questions at any time. The experiment led subjects to believe that the survey was investigating the influence of television network news programs on college aspirations among high school students as well as students' interactions in the classroom, imagery present in television network news programs, and students' plans for higher education.

Subjects were asked to answer approximately 70 multiple-choice and written opinion measures that focused on their demographics, news consumption, classroom interactions, interest in societal issues, and perception of African Americans on network news.

Manipulation Variables: Newscasts from CBS and NBC were chosen from the websites of both networks and YouTube. Commercials were not included in the newscasts since this might affect the information the subjects gave in the surveys. Each newscast was broadcast during the 2009 year and was between one and two minutes in length.

Post-Manipulation Measures: Subjects also viewed two newscasts from NBC and CBS television network news shows after answering measures (ABC was not selected since the network's newscasts cannot be embedded). There was no randomization of the television clips. Clips were

deliberately placed in a certain order. Subjects were first directed to a network newscast that focused on a societal issue they ranked as of greatest interest.

The second newscast featured an interview with President Barack Obama conducted by broadcast journalist Katie Couric. Obama addressed all of the societal issues given as choices within the survey. Subjects had no control over the newscasts, but were asked to click forward when the newscasts were completed. There was a timer on each news package page to discover how long they watched the clip. This was a manipulation check since subjects did not have voluntary control in watching this clip. Of the 50 students, 40 watched the entire clip.

Subjects then completed a series of post-manipulation measures, and were prompted for their personal reaction to the newscasts.

Debriefing Measures: Subjects were debriefed in a funneled fashion to determine if and when they noticed how television network news shows portrayed African Americans and if they had more interest in attending college based on watching the societal issue addressed on the newscast.

Data Collection Procedures: Data was collected on the same day of the experiment. The Qualtrics website, the survey provider, collected the initial data set. Once the experiment was completed, the data was downloaded to a computer to be analyzed using SPSS software. Likert scales and reverse Likert scales were created for each question to analyze the data.

## Chapter 5: Results & Analysis

After the surveys are completed, I believe I will be able to analyze why urban African American high school students may feel the way they feel about seeking a higher education. I will also have thorough and accurate qualitative results that will show the implications that television network shows have for the decisions students make in seeking or not seeking entry to a higher institution for their education.

My study will conclude that when African American high school students are watching television network news shows that have newscasts on subject or issue in which they are interested, then they will most likely want to pursue that subject or issue in college in order to solve it. I also believe that I will find that African Americans will have more positive views of their capabilities and more positive self-perceptions if they are watching more African Americans in dispositions they find ethically and morally good. In fact, they will feel more encouraged to do well in school and to believe that they can also do that caliber of good in the world, even if their peers or their environment may try to make them feel differently.

The endpoint definition and conclusion is that television network news shows have an impact on African American high school students' self-perceptions and college aspiration.

## Chapter 6: Discussion & Implications

New approaches should be followed in the development of network news programming due to the quantity of inaccuracy and stereotypical portrayals of African Americans and their effects on society, especially African American adolescents. Society should not allow network news executives and even local stations to hew to a philosophy that Minow (1961) criticized 40



years ago: the search for the highest rating means appealing to the lowest common denominator (Ledger, 2003). This is not how journalists were or have been taught to present news, but over time, networks and stations will become so focused on ratings that they will forget why accuracy is important. Stricter laws should be set for the content network news presents to its viewers. These stricter laws could also be implemented into all television programs as well, so stereotypes and inaccuracies will not be as heavily presented to viewers.

Additionally, most viewers do not want to see news or images that do not reflect the truth. In many cases, viewers see through the ultimate falsity of a newscast that distorts the community in which they live (Ledger, 2003) as did the African American adolescents who participated in this experiment. According to a study conducted by the *Project for Excellence* (Belt and Pertilla, 2002), nearly half the stations with the highest quality newscasts improved their ratings over the five years surveyed, compared to 38% of those with the worst newscasts. Therefore, if network news and other television stations want to improve their ratings, they must improve their quality and change their programming to reflect the community more.

The accuracy that can be implemented into network news and television in general will help expand on other issues and focuses within the world. Focusing more on information and less on sensationalism could also put less attention on race and skin color (Klein & Naccarato, 2003). This shift could allow audiences to focus on the importance of the news instead of the race that is making the news. A deliberate choice to introduce more complexity and variety in images of African Americans would make television news more positive, less likely to arouse white antagonism, and more representative of the African American community (Entman, 1994). It is through these actions that more changes can be implemented to not only to make television news reach a higher standard, but to make all television reach a higher standard.

Furthermore, an increase of African American journalists in the newsroom could help to make sure African Americans are presented accurately. For example, the Radio and TV News Directors Association (RTNDA) have increased efforts to hire people of color in news management roles, promoted the need for diversity in the newsroom, and held annual surveys to assess the number of minorities working in news broadcasting (Klein & Naccarato). These proactive steps need to be taken more seriously and implemented throughout the newsrooms of America. If the ultimate goal of journalism is to establish accuracy, news organizations should also look for prejudice and stereotyping when assessing and refining their news-making processes (Entman 1994). If news organizations take this step and encourage policymakers and audiences to do so as well, they could change how network news portrayals affect African Americans.

Additionally, more individuals could study television psychology in order to develop more ideas about how television affects adolescents in classroom settings and in their college aspirations. More information is needed, especially on how network news programming impacts the college aspirations of African American adolescents. Psychologists could make valuable contributions to the research on network news and its impact on society.

Yet beyond hiring more professionals of color and implementing new policies in the newsrooms, schools and parents can also take more initiative to encourage adolescents to be more analytical and critical of what they view on television. In fact, schools and parents can work together in this. Fisher (1999) found that schools that involve parents in making and implementing children's academic decisions are more likely to foster a high level of development than those that do not. Therefore, more steps could also be taken to encourage

parents to watch television network news with their children and talk together about the content they view.

Finally, schools with African American majorities among students can begin to teach their students more about their ancestry, culture, and philosophy of education. The African American community must begin to develop independent educational institutions that are grounded in an Africentric philosophy of education (*African Psychology* p. 65). If students receive more encouragement to receive an education, then maybe they will change their views on engaging in mainstream society.

#### Delimitations, Limitations, Assumptions

The anticipated limitation in the study were having enough student get parental consent forms signed to take the survey and having enough students to complete the survey. Some parents may have be reluctant to allow their child to participated in fear of being measured. However, the consent forms did explain the nature of the study, the minimal risks, and the benefits.

The delimitation in the study was the amount of the sample size and the selection of the sample size. A purposeful sample was used that had students ranging from ages 14-17 in grades 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th. The students were also in summer school due to failure of their previous level grade. An area like Crenshaw was selected to its location near an area, Los Angeles, and since most inhabitants there are African American and come from low social economic backgrounds.

The assumption was that at least 60% of the targeted audience would return signed consent forms and participate in the survey, which was proven to be accurate.

#### Future Research

In the future I would like to continue this research study, but on a larger scale. I would like to include more than 1,000 African American adolescents who are not only in summer and from various urban areas across America, including New York City, Detroit, and Chicago. I would also like to interact with students through interviewing them and include more societal issues based on new packages from ABC, CBS, and NBC. I hope my findings will encourage more African American adolescents to attend college and will stop the endorsement of stereotypical portrayals on network news.

Appendix

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