The Role of Media in Creating and Maintaining Ethnic Stereotypes

**Introduction**

Do you find yourself judging other cultures and ethnicities based on what you have seen from television? When you see African-American males do you unintentionally assume they are criminals or do they participate in illegal activities? When you see Asian Americans do you assume they are highly educated and intelligent? One reason we form these stereotypes is due to the information and images that the media presents us.

The images we see on television effect us in ways that we do not even realize. They prompt us to have preemptive thoughts and ideas about different races and ethnicities. Many television shows and movies impact our opinions and stereotypes of minorities and their culture. According to Lee and colleagues, “violence and antagonism appear to dominate as stereotypical elements used to describe African Americans” (Lee, Bichard, Irey, Walt, & Carlson, 2009, p. 97). An opinion poll by McAneny (1993) showed more than one-third (37%) of African American and Caucasian adults believed African Americans were “more likely” than all other ethnic groups to commit crimes (Lee et al., 2009). This presents a major problem in our society because it creates prejudice thoughts and negative connotations. The purpose of my project is to address this issue of the media creating and maintaining stereotypes and inform Longwood students how the media plays a major role in building these ethnic stereotypes.

The Cultivation Theory developed by Gerbner and Gross claims watching heavy amounts of television can modify one’s sense of reality. The more television watched leads to alterations of one’s worldview and the likelihood that their ideas will be consistent with the beliefs, values, and attitudes exposed to on the screen (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2013). This theory
directly relates with this issue because it explains how people learn culture and form future perceptions through watching television.

This issue of the media creating and maintaining ethnic stereotypes is necessary to investigate because the media plays such a dominant role in shaping people’s beliefs, values, and perceptions of minorities in our society. Exposure to false themes about race and ethnicity leads people to form assumptions that may not be true which could effect the way people interact with minorities. These negative and misleading stereotypes the media presents us need to be addressed, particularly in the Longwood community. Raising awareness of this issue can help students become less biased when interacting with other students, teachers, and future employers.

**Literature Review**

For the purpose of this study, culture is defined as culture is defined by common beliefs, ideas, and attitudes shared by a group of people who create meaning through learning from external influences. Culture is defined by how we interpret the messages we receive from outside influences, such as television, and use them to create a shared set of beliefs. Because the media often misrepresents minorities, Americans tend to believe that certain stereotypes define an entire minority.

Researchers have examined this issue of the media creating and maintaining stereotypes. Mass media outlets are very powerful in the way they shape our attitudes and perceptions. According to Delgado (1993) mass media outlets “help constitute our daily lives by shaping our experiences and providing the content for much of what we talk about (and how we talk) at the interpersonal level” (Samovar et al., 2013, p. 51). Mass media influences our cultural life by
communicating images and stories that contribute to a sense of cultural identity while simultaneously molding our beliefs and values (Samovar et al., 2013).

Lee, Bichard, Irey, Walt, and Carlson (2009) studied 450 college undergraduates who completed a survey designed to measure television consumption and its’ impact on ethnic stereotyping. Participants were to report what programs they regularly watched on television and how many hours per week they watched these programs. The students were then asked to rate their personal perceptions of five different ethnic groups including Caucasians, African Americans, Asians, Latinos/Hispanics, and Native Americans. The purpose of this study was to investigate the shaping of student’s perceptions of ethnic groups and the media’s role in this process (Lee et al., 2009).

The results of the Lee et al. (2009) study found that heavy viewers hold predominantly positive stereotypes of Caucasians, reporting them to be more dependable, stable, and less angry. The study revealed that heavy viewers hold more negative stereotypes of Asians, perceiving them to be less responsible, less warm, and more nervous. There were no significant stereotypes reported for Latinos/Hispanics. Native Americans received negative perceptions being stereotyped as typically less sophisticated, unintelligent, and un-adventurous. For African Americans, there was a mixed response; participants assigned both positive and negative stereotypes to African Americans based on the genre of television. This finding suggests that programs displaying more realistic or dramatic information may strive to show African Americans in a more positive light. Overall, evidence was found that heavy television viewers produce more negative racial stereotypes compared to light viewers (Lee et al., 2009). This study shows that this issue is important because television can become a tool for how people observe
minority groups and form their opinions, especially people who do not have direct contact with other ethnic groups.

In a similar study conducted by Zogby International, 1,264 teenagers nationwide between the ages of 13 and 18 were surveyed to determine stereotypes of ethnicities. The purpose of the study was to discover whether or not teens, specifically Italian American teens, perceive stereotyping in television and movies and also how this stereotyping directly affects them. One major finding of this study, which I found to be very interesting, was the reports of the participants when asked to identify the role or type of character a person would play based on their ethnicity or racial background. For African Americans, most participants reported athlete, gang member, and/or police officer. For Arab American they reported terrorist or convenience store clerk. For Jewish American- Physician/lawyer, CEO, teacher. There were also reports of other ethnicities, which can be found on the article. The results to this survey revealed teens’ perceptions and beliefs of other ethnic, religious, and racial groups are shaped by the stereotypes presented by the entertainment industry (The National Italian American Foundation, 2001).

Robert and Lichter (2011) asked over 1,200 students at a public high school in New York about their attitudes towards race and ethnicity in real life and on television. Researchers found that many of these students look to television for a guide or learning tool and they believe that what they see on screen is an accurate portrayal of the real world. Robert and Lichter also found that about one-third of the participants said that the ethnic characters they see on television affect their attitudes toward ethnic groups in real life. The more positive or favorable the opinion of a character, the more likely the student is to see the character as part of his or her ethnic group. Television may influence ethnic stereotyping mainly by encouraging viewers to identify the positive traits of television characters with the ethnic groups they represent (Robert and Lichter,
2011). This study is important because it emphasizes the fact TV conveys values and messages that people sometimes take in unintentionally. The evidence supports that television influences the way people form opinions about race and culture.

**Cultivation Theory**

The Cultivation Theory developed by Gerbner and Gross states that “over time television fosters the viewers’ notion of reality” (Samovar, 2013, p. 51). As previously stated, the more time spent watching television, the greater impact it will have on one’s views, beliefs, and values. Gerbner argued that viewers are more likely to accept these depictions as real or legitimate when television is watched more frequently (Lee et al., 2009). This plays a major role when it comes to culture because the media influences our worldview.

The Cultivation Theory is also mentioned in the textbook, *A first look at communication theory*. Gerbner claimed that heavy television viewers develop an exaggerated belief in a mean and scary world, which means the violence they watch on television can develop a social paranoia that counters notions of trustworthy people or safe surroundings. He considered television as the dominant force in shaping modern society. Gerbner believed that television is society’s institutional storyteller. A society’s stories give a logical picture of what exists, what is important, what is related to what, and what is right (Griffin, 2009, p. 349).

In 1979, Gerbner et al. conducted a study that consisted of 587 adolescents from New York and New Jersey. The questionnaire distributed consists of two types of questions dealing with actual facts and television answers. He found that the attitudes of those who watched TV more regularly were more congruent with television’s distorted contents. The study introduced the term “mainstreaming” which means “the tendency of differences to disappear among heavy
television viewers, apparently because of cultural and social factors” (Ahmad, 2009, p. 2). It is the process by which heavy TV viewers form a common socially conservative outlook through constant exposure to the same images and themes (Ahmad, 2009).

This theory directly relates to the proposed project because there is much evidence that watching TV can affect the way you form your opinions and beliefs about things in the real world. When the media demonstrates negative connotations of different races and ethnicities, we take those into account, and whether realizing it or not, it can influence the way we form our perceptions of other people.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the purpose of my project is to raise awareness of the issue that media creates and maintains these ethnic stereotypes. The Longwood community has not addressed this issue and I believe it is an issue worth talking about. College campuses have a lot of diversity and learning about other cultures is very beneficial to the learning environment. I want Longwood students to know how to stay unbiased and non-judgmental of other ethnicities and races. The studies I have presented in the literature review show evidence that this topic affects people worldwide and that these stereotypes on television are incorporated in the way we form our perceptions. The Cultivation Theory presented by Gerbner supports this notion and gives strong insight to explain this phenomenon.

**Part 2**

**Practical Contribution**

The misrepresented media portrayal of minorities is problematic because it has an unintentional effect on fostering stigma and discrimination. For example, Wood (as cited in
Samovar et al., 2013) argues, “when the media highlights incidents of crime committed by illegal immigrants, an image is created that all immigrants are engaged in criminal activities” (p. 232). People create meaning based on what they view in the media, which leads to overgeneralizations of many different minority groups. This leads people to form generalized perceptions to all members of a group when in reality, only one or perhaps a few members of the group engage in these particular behaviors.

So, how does forming media-based stereotypes affect college students? Possessing these pigeon holed views can keep students from becoming successful communicators. Guirdham (as cited in Samovar et al., 2013) affirms that stereotypes modify intergroup communication because they prompt individuals to base their preparation, transmission, and reception of messages on false beliefs (p. 233). This can present a major problem when students begin to enter the workforce because effective communication is crucial in the workplace. Interacting with other individuals and working on collaborative assignments is an everyday task in many jobs and it is inevitable that the workplace will consist of co-workers from many different minorities. Remaining unbiased and free of prejudices will help create a successful and positive work environment.

Another major setback of forming these generalizations is once they are formed and imbedded into everyday thinking, they are resistant to change. Direct contact with the outlets that help form these stereotypes only strengthens the ideas and beliefs people have already cultivated (Samovar et al., 2013, p. 233). This is why watching television only increases and solidifies the notions we have against minorities in the dominant culture. Having an open mind as well as knowing how to identify and change these negative stereotypes is an important skill that college students should know how to perform.
Addressing the issue on Longwood’s campus is very important because having negative stereotypes of various ethnic groups can also cultivate a hostile and divided campus community. Other universities such as Ohio University have started to raise awareness of this issue by having a group on campus called “STARS” which stands for students teaching about racism in society. STARS host workshops and teach-ins about tolerance and respect of ethnicities. One problem that Ohio University, as well as other campuses such as Pennsylvania State University, Duke University and Dartmouth College, is the idea of race-themed parties on campus. Students’ host parties, or “racist ragers” in which, the theme is to come dressed as a stereotype of a culture, such as dressing up as a black person or an Asian nerd (Muaddi, 2013). Although these students think this is just fun and games, it is actually very offensive to people who originate from those cultures. Displaying acts like this on campus represents the entire university can affect the way people view the school.

To raise awareness of this issue at Longwood University, I would like to host a campus wide event called “Reel Talk.” Reel Talk is a program offered through Campus Speak that uses films to break down cross-cultural barriers. It provides a new approach to diversity conversations and allows students to open up and express their opinions and how they feel. The workshop teaches students how to break down films to identify the stereotypes. This leads to honest conversations about diversity issues that often divide campus communities (Campus Speak, 2013).

During the program, students learn how to deconstruct characters and events in film to understand their effect on our personal judgments and behaviors. The instructors help students realize how we interpret differences, examine the roles of characters and how we identify with them, and even explore how social conditioning influences our actions, judgments and
assumptions. The workshop is four hours long and includes a participant workbook and a pre and post assessment. The learning outcomes of this workshop can help Longwood students to identify why this issue is important and how they can use the tools they learn for the rest of their career, especially communication studies majors.

Bringing the Campus Speak workshop to Longwood University will help prevent certain acts such as racist parties, as well as teach students how to identify common media-based stereotypes and remain unbiased in order to be successful in intercultural communication. What we see through the media really influences the way we perceive other cultures and ethnicities and we need to be aware of the effects the media can have on our perceptions.

Part 3

Execution

December 2013

I will have an appointment with Longwood’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion to discuss my idea of bringing Campus Speak’s Reel Talk workshop to Longwood and explain the benefits of the program. I will ask for feedback and insight on whether they believe it would be beneficial to our campus.

January 2014

After returning from Fall Break, I will meet with Lancer Productions to further the process of bringing the workshop here. I will discuss budget items with them and possible dates that this workshop could be held on campus.

January-February 2014
I will advertise the event on campus. I will put the event in Elise Angus’ weekly email and inform all sorority and fraternities of the benefits of the workshop. Flyers will be posted in D-hall, Student Union, and other various academic buildings throughout campus. Tickets will also be on sale through D-hall tabling during lunch and dinner hours. Tickets will most likely be $5 per person.

March 2014

Campus Speak will come to Jarmin for the 4-hour workshop on a weeknight or during the day on a Saturday or Sunday.

The potential resources and connections I would use to make this event happen on campus would be the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Lancer Productions, and the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life. These offices on campus would help me get the event started, as well as fund it, and help get the word out and raise awareness.

Costs and Budget

Campus Speak speakers and workshops range anywhere from $3,000 to $6,000. If the speaker is closer to the area of the school and if you book ahead of time, the price can go down. These prices are all-inclusive and include airfare and hotel stay (Campus Speak, 2013). The website provides posters and advertising materials for free, so it is easier to print and get the word out as soon as possible. To help pay for this event, tickets would be $5 and all of the money would go towards paying for the workshop. If sororities and fraternities made this event mandatory it would increase attendance a lot. Our goal would be to sell 350 tickets, which would raise $1,750 to go towards the cost of the workshop. I would meet with Lancer Productions to calculate the rest of the cost and hopefully find money in the budget to cover the rest.
References


