

**The Effects of African-American Male Representation
in the News and Media**

C&T 807 Multicultural Education

Dr. John Muchira

Coleton Dudley

12 December 2019

I. INTRODUCTION

As a son from a father who spent over 18 years in jail, incarcerated due to drug distribution, I know how it feels to be affected by an incarcerated parent. As an African-American male in America, I know what it feels like to be criminalized and stereotyped due to my skin color. It is with these experiences that the basis for my project stems; how is the media representing people of color, particularly African-American males, on the news and in other forms of media.

The focus of this research project is to examine the way AA males are portrayed in the news and media. Often, AA males are broadcast and exploited on news media significantly more in terms of criminalization than other groups which in turn affects how other groups view AA males. The purpose of this research is to determine ideas and feelings associated with publications of news and media; this study will look at AA male portrayal and the effect that it has on consumers. I originally wanted to focus solely on the news; however, I felt as if not including other forms of media would greatly limit my opportunity for research. Nonetheless, I was able to look at publications on news sources and other forms of media that allowed me a better understanding of how African-American males are represented and consequently viewed by other groups. Commercials and entertainment are tools in themselves to control and manipulate ideals surrounding people; there are plenty of African-American celebrities that are portrayed in a positive light on television due to their fame and status; however, what about the regular males that are committing crimes, violent or non-violent, and being exploited on the news and other forms of active media. My study will look into how black males are portrayed in criminalized publications to the news in comparison to other groups and particular to white

males. I will look into photo publications, text, and other forms of news media to inform this research. Questions that I intend to answer:

- How are AA males portrayed in the news when committing crime?
- How often are AA males in the news for crimes compared to other groups?
- What is the narrative when these news broadcasts come out? Are they demeaning?

Generalizing?

- How often are AA males on the news for positive publication? Ex. Academia, discovery/invention, heroism, etc.
- What are the effects of this representation on others and their perception on AA males?

My reasoning for wanting to perform this research came from various reasoning besides what has been previously described. Through various media outlets and watching television, I started to notice the varying discrepancies to which AA males were represented in the news and other forms of media. There are quite frankly not many positive publications regarding black males. My want to do this research comes from my need to know the effect to which these negative portrayals have an effect on the ongoing racial battles that AA males are still facing today.

The thought behind my literature selection was very intentional. The breadth of the subject can be very vast, and there are varying opinions and viewpoints regarding this particular subject, thus I included different types of literature to gain a holistic understanding of the aptitude and effect of media usage on the black male identity. Most of the research developed a common theme. Publications and related research often referred to the fact that black males are overly represented as criminals in news and media outlets. To develop actual numbers in terms

of how many more times they are represented would take research with a great amount of longevity and validity; most of the research that I reviewed did not give percentages or integers of any sort for how to determine the difference. This to me is a part of the reason that I wanted to do this research, and opened my eyes to a topic that has a tremendous effect on people of color and consumers in general. Although there were not percentages for how often AA males appeared as criminals in the media, the reviews of literature that I conducted still show similar patterns. Another example of this is how AA males have been viewed as aggressive and physical. For example, an article written for the Opportunity Agenda referenced this seemingly physicality trait stating, "the media world is populated by some black males we admire, but these tend to be associated with a relatively limited range of qualities, such as physical ability and/or entertainment skills" (Opportunity Agenda). At first, I was unable to see the connection between this physical and aggressive representation as having an effect on the portrayal of black males until I conducted more research regarding the topic, of which will be discussed later. Overall, related research regarding this topic was very limited in terms of numbers, but provided great insight into what perceptions have been made about African-American males.

II. METHODOLOGY

The selection of my media sources was very specific to what I wanted to achieve as a result of my research. In other words, I used my best judgment at varying the different sources of information that I could leverage to develop the best understanding of AA male representation as possible. For that reason, I chose to not limit my referencing solely to academic research put forth through universities or other online libraries; I did use university libraries for some of my research, but it was not limited to that. The reason for my expansion of sources was mostly due

to the lack of academic research related to such a specific topic. Thus, the collection of data and information for this project was conducted through a synthesis of information from academic articles, online research publications, journal articles from newspapers, etc. I felt as if these were all appropriate sources of information because every writer has different bias and understanding of a topic, so these opportunities have allowed me to view my concern from a variety of different perspectives.

III. FINDINGS

I was very disappointed that it was difficult to gain accurate statistics regarding African-Americans and how they are viewed in the media; however, I gained a much better understanding of the effects that these seemingly common portrayals had. One theory that I ran across that had a tremendous impact on the development of this research was through the idea of “cultivation theory.” This theory was originally coined by Perse (1986) but was further developed by Punyanunt-Carter (2008) to be more conducive to its use. The idea behind cultivation theory is that people develop understandings and judgments on the social context around them. This is important because these negative images that are often found are essentially developing bias in others surrounding the idea of African American males and their traits. When groups are being exposed to strong, common, and demeaning media references they start to develop a “perceived realism” (Punyanunt-Carter). This idea extends the notion that whatever an individual perceives to be true about a group is “real” to them. Their perception is essentially reality. If groups are seeing AA males in a negative light commonly, they will start to develop feelings that will lead them to believe that everyone belonging to the group internalizes, exemplifies, and displays these “demoralized” characteristics. Within this research

Punyanunt-Carter also explains these effects on the portrayal of AA males on a college campus. A study was performed with 400+ students from a large university where students were exposed to news and media regarding AA males. The study showed that “viewers perceived the occupational roles and negative personality characteristics that African Americans portrayed on television as real or true to life” (Punyanunt-Carter). College students with access to televisions with news and other media perceived AA males as truly having these negative traits. This is just one example of how negative representation has an impact on perception.

These developed perceptions have a significant impact on the way that African American males are treated. Besides the developed realism of negative stereotypes and portrayal, these issues have very serious repercussions for AA males. Disproportionate criminality and incarceration are both affected by the way AA males are viewed in the media. Studies performed by the National Academy of Sciences show that black males are far more likely to be killed by use of police force than any other ethnic group. It is as if AA males are being marginalized in a way that lends them to be victims of extreme stereotyping to the point of mass incarceration and violence. A Rutgers study on the effect of media portrayals on AA males theorizes that black male representation has a negative effect on police violence, "Unarmed black Americans are five times more likely to be shot and killed by police than unarmed white Americans” (Romanenko). From the development of this research, it is clear that a developed but perceived realism surrounding traits of AA males can lead to violence, discrimination, and injustice.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE AND SUMMARY

When I finished my research in terms of reading and understanding the various sources that I have described, I was quite shocked at the reality of this situation. A development of

perceptions that is being made by the media has a tremendous impact on the way that AA males are viewed and consequently treated. There are obvious consequences to these negative media portrayals; thus we must continue to shift the way we think and teach. The lack of cultural diversity and awareness speaks to the ever present need for educators to continue to develop themselves multiculturally. We are, of course, not the only outlet to speaking out, but we can make a huge difference. The first step to achieving cultural reform is for teachers to be the proponent for change in their classroom. Chapter 10 of Banks & Banks (2013) discusses the need for teachers to be advocates for their students, getting to know them in whatever way possible so that they can develop lasting and trusting relationships with students. This will result in students feeling comfortable being themselves. One recommendation made in this chapter is to “make sure that your classroom conveys positive and complex images of various ethnic groups” (Bank & Banks). If college students are influenced by the perception of African-American males, then the ever permeable mind of a child, when exposed to similar messages and representations, would be influenced to develop a perceived realism as well.

It is then important for educators to show various ethnic groups doing positive things and speaking positively about differences in cultures. The school environment must reflect cultural relevance, without essentializing, in order for students to truly feel comfortable being themselves. Being the facilitator of change in the classroom in opposing and challenging cultural bias will help to eliminate the negative portrayals of AA males. Banks & Banks (2013) also recommend that teachers develop an “adaptive knowledge” which will allow them to facilitate conversations surrounding culture. Not only will the teacher become more comfortable having these conversations, it also allows them to function within the varying cultures in the classroom

community. Having family surveys and other forms of communication between families, teachers, and students allows for transparency and clear-cut rules of things that are respectable.

For the most change to be done, teachers have to be educated on multicultural topics and be exposed to and encouraged to have uneasy conversations surrounding inequity in this country. If we want our students to live better lives, we have to consciously aim to eliminate racial bias and stereotyping from news and media in order to change these developed perceptions of AA males and other marginalized groups.

References

- Atske, S., Barthel, M., Stocking, G., & Tamir, C. (2019). 7 facts about black Americans and the news media. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/07/facts-about-black-americans-and-the-news-media/>.
- Banks, J. A., & Banks, C. A. (2013). *Multicultural education: issues and perspectives*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Edwards, F., Lee, H., & Esposito, M. (2019). *Risk of being killed by police use of force in the United States by age, race–ethnicity, and sex*. National Academy of Sciences .
- Kulaszewicz, Kassia E.. (2015). *Racism and the Media: A Textual Analysis*. Retrieved from Sophia, the St. Catherine University repository website: https://sophia.stkate.edu/msw_papers/477
- Opportunity Agenda. *Media Portrayals and Black Male Outcomes*. Retrieved from <https://www.opportunityagenda.org/explore/resources-publications/media-representations-impact-black-men/media-portrayals>.
- Punyanunt-Carter, N. M. (2008). *The Perceived Realism of African American Portrayals on Television*. *The Howard Journal of Communications*.
- Romanenko, N. (2018). *Media portrayals of black men contribute to police violence*, Rutgers

study

says. Retrieved from
https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2018-11/ru-mpo112118.php.

Smith, D. (2013). Images of Black Males in Popular Media. Retrieved from
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/black-men-media_b_2844990.

Williams, J. P. (2019, August 5). Study: Police Violence a Leading Cause of Death for Young Men. Retrieved from
<https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2019-08-05/police-violence-a-leading-cause-of-death-for-young-men>.

Wilson, D. (2019). Who's watching? A look at the demographics of cable news channel watchers.
Retrieved from
<https://pos.org/whos-watching-a-look-at-the-demographics-of-cable-news-channel-watches/>.