



How Racial Stereotypes in Popular Media Affect People — and What Hollywood Can Do to Become More Inclusive

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In 2015, the average U.S. resident consumed traditional and digital media for about 15.5 hours each day. In the same year, eight- to twelve-year-old children consumed an average of six hours of media a day and teens consumed nine hours. This mind-boggling amount of media consumption shapes how U.S. residents see the world, and racial imagery in the media has cumulative effects on society. Often biased media portrayals of racial groups cannot be dismissed as mere entertainment, especially not if their impact on youth are taken seriously.

Harms from Portrayals of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Media

Researchers have found that prolonged television exposure predicts a decrease in self-esteem for all girls and for black boys, but an increase in self-esteem for white boys. These differences correlate with the racial and gender practices in Hollywood, which predominantly casts white men as heroes, while erasing or subordinating other groups as villains, sidekicks, and sexual objects. Studies also show how media images of Native American mascots lower the self-esteem and affect the moods of Native American adolescents and young adults (who suffer from high suicide rates).

Beyond specific effects on particular groups of viewers, racial images packaged as entertainment can skew the way all viewers understand and categorize people. Popular media can have a negative impact on whites' perceptions of people of color and racial stereotypes in film and television can exacerbate preexisting racist fears. One study finds that popular media depictions of nonverbal features of people of color, including facial expressions and body language, influence racial biases for white viewers.

When there is a lack of contact between racial groups, people tend to rely on media stereotypes to formulate ideas about people outside of their own race. For instance, stereotyped depictions of Latinx people in the media can lead audiences to associate immigration with increased unemployment and crime. Furthermore, the media's tendency to fuel racial misperceptions can contribute to public support for harsher punishments for people of color.

How Hollywood Can Take Strong Corrective Actions

Diversity may be a buzzword in Hollywood, but full participation by people of color continues to lag behind that of white males. Hollywood requires better strategies. Studios can work to diversify Hollywood's employment and content by establishing responsibility structures, including specific committees, staff positions, and hiring plans dedicated to increasing representation of people of color. Doing that, research shows, could help boost racial diversity in workplaces, particularly at the managerial level.

Hollywood should hire staff members who demonstrate a track record of creating content for people of color and casting them in varied and complex roles. Most companies use professional recruiters, and Hollywood should do the same across all ranks. Each studio and network should have at least one designated recruiter for diverse talent behind the scenes and a designated casting director who is trained to find actors of color and in anti-racist practices. They should have experience working with and recruiting diverse populations.

Studios should set hiring targets for people of color —both in visible and behind the scenes positions— in accord with their shares in the U.S. population. Research shows that setting specific hiring goals aimed at increasing the number of people of color is one of the most effective ways of diversifying workplaces. To increase the number of people of color in the pipeline, new hiring should occur semiannually or even quarterly. Although many networks host diversity programs and showcases for actors, writers, and directors from underrepresented groups, networks could go further and set aside shares of jobs for underrepresented groups.

Current diversity programs require improvement, because most diversity writers are released from their shows after hiring them to fulfill quotas. Studios need to mentor, train and provide a longer trial period for such hires, as they would for any other valued employee. In other words, studios and TV networks need to value increasing their staff of color enough to support them beyond the initial hiring period. Furthermore, studios and networks should rethink the name, “diversity hire” because a stigma of lower qualifications or free labor is often associated with such labels.

Besides hiring, networks and studios need to focus on retention. They should establish networking and mentoring programs for people of color, which research shows to have a positive effect on retention. They should pair new hires of color with key experienced people. This practice already exists; for example, ABC mandated that Shonda Rhimes, who had no television experience prior to her first show, *Grey’s Anatomy*, be paired with the more experienced James Parriott. This practice could be instituted across all ranks and positions, because such pairings do not just benefit the incoming people of color in terms of training and mentorship, but also veterans, who get exposure to fresh perspectives and new ideas.

By generating inclusive social networks, Hollywood would attract and retain more talent of color. Chris Rock attributes his own success to the help of established black actors, such as Eddie Murphy, Keenen Ivory Wayans, and Arsenio Hall, who took “chances” on him. He, in turn, helps develop other black actors, such as Leslie Jones. More people of color in key positions and in the pipeline will help accelerate racial inclusion in the industry.

In an ever more racially diverse world, Hollywood’s ability to include different racial and ethnic groups is pivotal. Industry leaders must take responsibility for diversity problems, and white elites should not hide shortfalls behind a facade of colorblind tolerance. Demographic changes and an ever-expanding international box office will put pressure on Hollywood to diversify, but not necessarily to overhaul longstanding racially relevant barriers — unless more concerted efforts are made. As Viola Davis stated in her 2015 Emmy award acceptance speech, “If they exist in life, then we should see it on TV. We should see it on stage or on the screen. As many people are out there are as many stories that should be being told.”

Read more Nancy Wang Yuen, *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism* (Rutgers University Press, 2016).