

Hollywood's Use of Racial Stereotypes and its Direct Impact on Society

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Movies like “Birth of A Nation”, “Gone with the Wind” and even “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” are explicitly racist when portraying characters of color (Purcell). Although America’s film and television industry have moved away from the explicit racism, they have yet to completely separate themselves from racism and this is evident through the amount of stereotypes that play out in films. Although Hollywood has really come a long way, contemporary American film and television use racial stereotypes in a way that enable people to develop mental representations that are based on stereotype-based-beliefs, identity contingency, and implicit bias.

People develop mental representations in order to make sense of the world. Every individual has a unique representation of the world made up through their own individual experiences and images. Although it is unique, people do tend to share similarities within conceptual maps, enabling them to discuss things with each other. Through these mental representations, people connect objects and ideas together. One makes connections based what they have seen and the context they have seen it in (Hall). With regard to film and television, the context characters are shown in and how they are portrayed have a huge influence on members of a society. They can adversely affect the way a society views a group of people as well as negatively affect the way that group of people see themselves.

Disney’s “Aladdin” proves the way Middle Eastern society is portrayed in the West has negatively affected people’s mental representations regarding the Middle East. The film’s title song sequence includes the phrase, “Where they [Arabs] cut off your ear if they don’t like your face, it’s barbaric, but hey, its home...” (Aladdin). The concept of stereotype -based-beliefs is largely at play here. Stereotype -based- beliefs are society’s impressions and thoughts about a group of people that are solely based on stereotypes (Guyll). In an essay titled “The Potential Roles of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies, Stigma Consciousness, and Stereotype Threat in Linking Latino/a Ethnicity and Educational Outcomes”, the authors write about how engaging in stereotyping affects how school personnel view Hispanic students,

resulting in their negative school performance. The school administration's ignorance regarding the Latin American culture and traditions lead them to base their knowledge off of media perpetuated stereotypes. In this case, the media perpetuated stereotypes regarding the intelligence of Hispanic students lead school administrators to underestimate their academic performance (Guyll). The team behind "Aladdin" worked in a similar way. It is clear that they were unaware and had not been properly exposed to Middle-Eastern cultures and relied heavily on popular stereotypes to generate the characters and attitudes within their movie. The characters and setting in the film are viewed as highly exotic, and the society was portrayed as barbaric and dangerous. Although Aladdin and Jasmine themselves seems to associate more with Western culture rather than Arab culture, the other Arab characters in the film are shown to be threatening and ill-mannered (Wingfield). At one point in a scene where Jasmine roams a marketplace, one of the shop vendors gets physically violent with her to the point where he pulls out a sword (Aladdin). The stereotypes regarding the barbarism of Arab people play out in the scene and these types of scenes skew people's mental representations regarding the Arab world even more.

Mental representations of certain races and ethnic groups can be positive, but can also significantly impact the way a society views people from those cultures. In the TV show "Hey Arnold!", Gerald and Phoebe, two characters in the show, deal with the concept of identity contingency. Gerald is African American and is best friends with the main protagonist of the show, Arnold. He has an outgoing personality, is very good at sports, and is also very superstitious. Phoebe is half-Japanese and half-white and is also one of Arnold's friends. She is shown to be highly intelligent, small, sensitive and kind (Craig, "List of Hey Arnold! characters."). It is no doubt that Gerald's and Phoebe's characters are based on typical African American and Asian stereotypes. Gerald's character traits are based on the stereotypes that African Americans are good at sports and are superstitious. Phoebe's character traits are based on the stereotype that Asians are extremely smart, small and sensitive. Although these particular stereotypes are positive, it is important to realize that they are not the only stereotypes surrounding people of these ethnicities and that positive stereotypes can still have a negative impact of a community of people.

Although this show was widely regarded for its onscreen diversity, by portraying the characters based on stereotypes the mental representations people had regarding African Americans and sports, and Asians and sensitivity was only reinforced ("List of Hey Arnold! characters.") . When those connections are strengthened, they lead to the concept of identity contingency.

Identity contingency refers to the concept that people must deal with certain situations because of who they are and their social identity (Steele). In "Hey Arnold!", Phoebe continues to act submissive and fragile in response to her friends bossing her around because she is constrained to acting in that way. Due to the limited mental representation the show director and writers had regarding Asian culture and society, Phoebe is forced to act a certain way. Similarly, Gerald's position as an African American boy seems to constrain him to being athletic and superstitious. The "Hey Arnold!"s director and writers solely based his character off of the media's stereotypes and therefore Gerald is limited to acting in a way that caters to these stereotypes.

The idea of identity contingency and its limitations on the person being stereotyped also has implications on the outsider, or the person who is doing the stereotyping. This is known as implicit bias. Implicit bias is the concept that people harbor attitudes regarding a specific race or an ethnicity and therefore elicit positive or negative reactions depending on the attitude (Aung). In an article published by Hyphen Magazine, the author, Khin Mai Aung, writes about an incident in which a professor was interrupted during a BBC interview by his two children. The children's mother is seen struggling to get the two children out of the room. The video was found by many to be hilarious, endearing and relatable (Hauser). But the author brings up a point that many seemed to ignore. The woman in the video was found to be the wife of the professor and the mother of the children, but before this was pointed out, many believed that the woman was the children's nanny, due to the fact that she was Asian, while the professor was white (Aung). The author discusses the idea of implicit bias and how it can be changed simply by how our life experiences play out. As she says, " I was disturbed when my friends concluded Ms. Kim was probably a nanny. Not because they suddenly sprouted horns and became "racist," but precisely

because I know they're not racist. I could have made the same mistake, if the video or my experiences had been just a little different" (Aung). The author brings out the idea that implicit bias are surface level and if people took the time to understand before making snap judgements, many of the incidents like could be avoided. Implicit bias is still seen on screen in Hollywood today, one example being "Power Rangers". "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers" erupted onto the scene in 1993. A show based on a Japanese tv show, there were originally 5 main protagonists. On the surface, the show seems to have nothing off about it, until the viewer realizes that the yellow Power ranger is played by an Asian actress and that the black Power Ranger is played by an African American actor. The remaining Power Rangers are white. The colors of the Power Rangers are directly linked to the racial profiles of the actors who play them. To go on, the yellow Power Ranger, Trini Kwan, is also seen as the intellectual among the group, playing up the stereotype of the "Smart Asian"("Mighty Morphin Power Rangers."). The black Power Ranger, Zack Taylor, is portrayed as an athletic, hip-hop loving, ladies' man who is also a great dancer, characteristics that are stereotypically associated with African Americans ("Zack Taylor."). As pointed out earlier, although these are positive stereotypes, they still over-generalize the characteristics of a group of people, forcing them into societal confines. The idea of implicit bias is clear here, because it seems that the show directors and writers were not explicitly racist, but rather had implicit biases that made them portray a yellow Power Ranger by an Asian actor and a black Power Ranger by an African American actor. The implicit bias played further when the show directors and writers assumed that the yellow Power Ranger should be the intellectual while the black Power Ranger should be the athlete. It is clear that these assumptions and implicit bias was formed based on the media perpetuated stereotypes regarding African Americans and Asians.

It is important to note that although progress is to be made, we cannot discount the progress that has already occurred. The industry has moved away from a time of black-faced minstrelsy, and ridiculous explicit racism (Sandage). But they have approached and have been stuck on a new form of racism that has similar implications on society as a whole, but due to its implicit, obscure form, has long not been

seen. The media's role in the life of a person is substantial as they can influence people to form opinions based on the information they feed them. When the media decides to step away from the stereotypes and reflect society as diverse as it actually is, then maybe the viewers will be able to develop more robust mental representations.

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