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Consequences of Racial Stereotyping

by

Wornie L. Reed, Ph.D.

What are the consequences of negative portrayals of blacks? As mentioned in the previous articles, the media help to provide definitions of social reality, of social situations. Attendant upon such definitions is an implicit action orientation, a recommendation as to action appropriate to the situation.

Slavery was supported by the general definition that blacks were lesser human beings; the movie *Birth of a Nation* helped to (re)define blacks as savages. Although some of the current negative media portrayals of blacks may be unintentional, action orientations follow. For example, if an ethnic group (e.g., African Americans) is seen as producing mainly athletes and criminals — two categories represented prominently in the media — the group may not be regarded as a significant contributor to society. Members of the dominant white society are thus influenced to hold blacks in low regard. And worse still, some members of the dominant society use such stereotyping to block the equal participation of blacks in social and economic activities.

Thus, the media are a significant factor in the ongoing battle for racial progress. While some of the battles take place in official forums (i.e., governmental institutions), other battles take place in un-

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official forums such as newspapers, television, radio, movies, books, and magazines. These should not be taken lightly; there is ample evidence that individuals act on the basis of their socialization, and the media play a central role in that socialization.

Movies

The movie *Glory* is a touching and heart-warming story. Uncharacteristically, it shows blacks as heroes. However, it is flawed in an unforgivable way. The average viewer will leave the movie with incorrect knowledge about the role of blacks in the Civil War. We learn that a number of black men — mostly escaped slaves with nothing to lose — volunteered for the war and were whipped into shape by an Irish drill sergeant. We learn that another black regiment, a

disorganized group of hoodlums, was brought in from the Midwest. Of course this is incorrect. Some 186,000 black soldiers fought on the Union side in the Civil War. Most of the men of the 54th and 55th Regiments from Massachusetts were free men who could have returned to their homes. Yet, the typical viewer leaves this movie “knowing” that fewer blacks fought in the Civil War than fought in the Revolutionary War (some 5,000).

The reader might think this use of “dramatic license” a matter of minor significance. It is anything but minor. As I stated in the introduction, what most people know about the world is what they get from the various media, especially movies and television. In the case of the movie *Glory* one gets a distorted view of history and receives no contradiction of this “knowledge” from other media sources.

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One might argue that a similar distortion could occur — as a result of dramatic license — in “a true story” about a group of whites. But, there is one critical difference. History books have amply detailed the activities of other whites at the time. No such frame of reference has been available for blacks. What one sees on the screen is what one gets.

By drastically understating the role of blacks in the Civil War and indirectly making the same comment about the role that blacks played in the Revolutionary War, the film *Glory* helps to maintain the incorrect but generally held view that blacks played no major roles in the development of this country. This stereotype misrepresents the degree to which blacks have served their country. It thus reduces the legitimacy of the claim that African Americans have on the fruits of this society.

The movie *Mississippi Burning* was shameful in the way it distorted the civil rights movement and the actions of black Mississippians. Blacks were depicted as passive and scared, and the FBI — of all people — were the heroes. This type of depiction is simply an updated version of previous movies showing happy slaves satisfied with their enslavement and appreciative of their “benevolent” master.

News

The study by Kirk Johnson of the media images of Boston’s black community provides a new definition/description of racial stereotyping. It brings it up to date. In generations past we have been more concerned with the intentional and overt mischaracterizations of blacks in the various media. While this is still continuing, we also need to pay attention to racial stereotyping that arises from the sum total of

representations of blacks when all news reports are taken together. We note how consistently blacks are seen as criminals, entertainers, or athletes with the emphasis on criminals.

The recent Stuart murder case is a textbook example of the process of racial stereotyping and of the consequences of stereotyping. When Charles Stuart reported that he and his wife had been shot by a black man, his story “benefited” from two stereotypes about blacks. There is the general picture, as mentioned earlier, that criminality is a primary attribute of the black community and that a significant proportion of blacks are criminals. In addition to that, there is the general assumption based upon that stereotype that blacks commit more violent crimes than whites. This is not true. Proportionately, blacks commit more violent crimes than whites, but whites commit more of the total number of violent crimes that are committed in the country, and they commit more of the nonviolent crimes. This is no attempt to deny the fact that poor black urban communities produce a large proportion of the violent crimes in cities like Boston. But the stereotypical picture both exaggerates and exploits the situation in much the same way that Charles Stuart did.

The reason we feel it necessary to have a forum such as this is to make it clear that when we write and talk about racial stereotyping, we are calling attention to a social process that has serious and enormously adverse consequences. Everyone is familiar with some of the consequences of the racial stereotyping in the Stuart case. If blacks are defined as criminals, then they will not be seen as requiring the

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same rights and protection as others. The media’s stereotyping of the black community gave a kind of license to the behavior of the police as they went on a rampage through the black community in search of a suspect.

Ironically, it may have been Charles Stuart’s undoing to have concocted a story based on such a strong stereotype. If Charles Stuart had said that a white man had shot him and his wife, there almost certainly would not have been as much interest and attention called to the case. When a black man is ac-

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cused of killing a white woman the case is investigated and pursued relentlessly. Ultimately this relentlessness led authorities to Chuck Stuart.

Conclusion

What we have seen here is that while the makers of the movie *Glory* did back away to some extent from the usual practice of distorting a story about blacks by showing it through the experiences of whites, the movie was substantially flawed – to the detriment of African Americans. We have also seen that while the news media might have become slightly more sensitive through the years in how they portray black individuals, it still has a long way to go, especially in terms of understanding and acting upon the distorted way it continues to portray black communities and blacks in general.

We are not suggesting here that the media cease to cover crime in black communities. We understand that it is extremely unlikely that the commercial media will do that. The issue is what else is covered. The media should cover other stories that are occurring on a daily basis in black communities – some positive and some negative. And, of course, to aid in that process the media must hire more black and other minority reporters and columnists.

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