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Portrayals of Immigrants in Mass Media: Honest Depiction of Cultural Differences or  
Unfair Stereotype

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**Keynote:**

Immigration to the United States remains an issue of great public interest. During a time in which new legislation for immigration attention has also focused on the issue of how people who immigrate to the United States are treated in mass media, particularly television and the movies. Specifically, are immigrants being singled out for unfair stereotyping in the media, or are media depictions fair. Specifically, are “stereotyped” depictions of immigrants in the media reflective of actual cultural differences, or are they unfair prejudice with little basis. Arguments for both perspectives will be presented.

**Background:**

The 2000 US Census indicated that approximately thirty-one million people living in the United States, representing eleven percent of the total population, are foreign born individuals. People from Latin America make up over half (52%) of these individuals, with significant groups from Asia (26%) and Europe (16%). Individuals from Mexico alone accounted for 9.2 million foreign born residents of the United States, approximately thirty percent of the total foreign born US population. As such a significant minority of individuals currently living in the United States have migrated from other nations.

Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, concerns over immigration and illegal immigration in particular have been heightened. Public Agenda polls on attitudes toward immigration demonstrate a hardening of American attitudes toward immigration following the terrorist strikes. Although it is debatable whether tightening immigration laws would effectively prevent further terrorist attacks by foreign-born nationals, this reaction is, perhaps, not unexpected. Terror Management Theory, for instance, predicts

that individuals (of all cultures) will be more openly hostile to those of other cultures when presented with threats to their own mortality. Debates over immigration are waged in other countries where immigration is common, particularly in the nations of Europe such as England, Spain and the Netherlands. Each of these nations have also seen terrorist activity at the hands of persons of recent foreign descent, although in the case of the London bombings, the perpetrators were themselves born in England. Thus the issue of immigration also involves the integration of foreign-born or descended communities into the larger national community. For example, the 2005 riots in France largely involved North African immigrant communities who had high unemployment rates and had not been integrated well into the larger French community. In discussing recent terrorist incidents in the United States and Europe it is necessary to point out that the vast majority of immigrants are not involved in violent acts against their host country, and “native” (a term here used broadly) populations are not themselves immune to self-inflicted terrorism as the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing exemplified.

That having been said, Americans generally, as a group, remain positive about immigration. According to a recent Gallup Poll (June, 2006), two-thirds of Americans, feel that immigration remains a good thing for the United States, although concerns about the use of government resources by illegal immigrants remain. Thus it may be fair to say that American opinions about immigration are divided between an acknowledgement that immigration overall remains positive for the country, tempered by concerns over terrorism and concerns that government revenues may be drained by illegal immigrants’ use of public services. Perhaps this duality of perspective, or ambivalence, toward immigration was evident in recent (April, 2006) protests over immigration legislation.

These protests reflected a very complicated national attitude toward immigration, with many individuals acknowledging the benefits of immigration, yet also concerned with observance for the nation's immigration laws. Given a national attitude toward immigration that is mixed, how does this reflect in media portrayals of immigrants themselves?

Arguably, it has become common in academic circles to discuss the media as a tool of socialization in which persons behave in a manner consistent with models they view on television. However, a review of the literature on media effects suggests that the research is often flawed, inconsistent and, at best, produces only weak effect sizes (see Freedman, 2002 or Ferguson, 2003 for a discussion). Thus, this article will begin with several assumptions about the media.

- 1.) Media reflects societal views, rather than creates them.
- 2.) Media portrayals of phenomenon, in this case immigration and immigrants, are typically not consistent.
- 3.) The Media has no motive behind its portrayals other than to sell tickets, products or advertisement space and time.

These assumptions may, of course, be controversial among some academic circles, but for purposes of this discussion, they remove the focus from the somewhat convoluted debate on media socialization, and rather onto what media portrayals say about the society itself.

Before examining these debate questions, it is important to clarify the meaning of what is meant by the term stereotype. "Stereotype" is here defined as a description of a group (whether ethnic, gender, religion, etc.) wherein it is suggested that most or all

members of that group share a particular trait or set of traits. Stereotypes are thus used to prejudge members of that group rather than evaluating them on their individual characteristics. Although stereotypes are generally considered a negative phenomenon, the traits themselves may either be positive or negative. Examples of stereotypes thus range from positive stereotypes such as “All Asian people are good at math” to negative stereotypes such as “All Irish people are alcoholics.” It is possible that stereotypes may, at times, be based on actual group differences, but tend to be overgeneralized and used to make judgments about members of the group in the absence of supporting evidence for that individual. For example with recent waves of immigration from Middle Eastern regions dominated by Arabic people (see Ferguson, 2004) it may be true that a larger proportion of Arabic-Americans are recent immigrants than is true for other groups such as Caucasians or African-Americans. However, stereotyping all Arabic-Americans as immigrants may lead to awkward moments when answers such as “New Jersey” are replied to polite inquiries as to country of origin. Similarly negative stereotypes may have some basis in reality. For example, men are stereotyped as aggressive and/or violent, in comparison to women. Indeed men are responsible for 85% of violent crimes and tend also to dominate aggressive or extreme sports. However using this “stereotype” to judge individual men is unlikely to be reliable, as many men (indeed likely the majority) do not fit this stereotype of violent or harmful.

By contrast, the term “prejudice” is here used to indicate a stereotype which is specifically intended to portray a group of individuals in an unfairly unfavorable light. Prejudice may often be used to promote a hostile social agenda such as racism, sexism or religious prejudice. Examples include 19<sup>th</sup> century European views of the “white man’s

burden” to rule over native non-whites who were viewed as less intelligent and less civilized, discussions of Jewish conspiracies to rule the world (or interestingly enough, the media) that promote anti-Semitism and violence against Jews, or portrayals of women as weak-willed and irrational (or men as dumb immoral oafs) that promote sexism. The essence of prejudice is that the belief is not only negative, but “unfair”, that is to say, not based on any observable independent reality. For example, unlike the stereotype of men as aggressive, which has some empirical basis (although as a stereotype is overgeneralized), the prejudice that individuals from non-European cultures are less intelligent than Europeans has no basis in empirical fact.

*The Debate Over Media Stereotypes of Immigrant Populations.*

**Position A: Media Representations of Immigrants Reflect Group Prejudice Against Immigrant Populations.**

Certainly the media tends to represent groups of people in ways that are largely consistent with the broader society’s view of those groups. As such the media may represent a public face to the biases, concerns and worries of the general social group from whom the media expects to extract its funding. The social concerns of a particular era may thus be reflected in the prevailing themes in the media. For example, during the Reagan era of the 1980’s when cold-war tension had reached a new peak, Russians were frequently portrayed in the media as authoritarian, aggressive and technologically advanced. Examples of this include movies such as *Red Dawn*, in which the Warsaw Pact successfully invades the United States, *Rocky IV*, which featured the tag-line “Get

ready for the next world war" and television miniseries such as *The Day After* and *Amerika*. These examples from the cold war indeed exemplify how stereotypes can be both accurate (in part at least) and inaccurate. By and large, the Soviet Union did have a history of authoritarianism and aggressiveness, but with the end of the cold-war proved to be economically and technologically struggling in comparison with market-economies of the West.

Naturally with the end of the cold war, such depictions of Russians in the media have largely evaporated, perhaps replaced with other stereotypical depictions. Issues of immigration and immigration reform remain in the public consciousness, particularly after the foreign based terrorism incident of 9/11. Given that American society is wrestling with and ambivalent about the role of immigration in the future, there is the risk that immigrants themselves may be portrayed in an unfairly negative light, reflecting these anxieties and mixed feelings. It is possible then that media depictions of immigrant groups may move beyond realistic (although perhaps overgeneralized) depictions of actual group differences and extend to prejudice against immigrant groups that is reflective of social hostility toward these groups.

As noted earlier the largest proportion of immigrants coming to the United States currently are coming from Latin America. Similarly, much of the recent controversy on immigration has focused on immigration from Latin America, particularly through the border of Mexico. Although Americans are divided in their opinions on such immigration, it is possible that ambivalent feelings may spill over into negative portrayals of Hispanics/Latinos in the media.

Latinos generally remain underrepresented in the media. For example, during the 2003-2004 television season, about 6.5% of characters were identified as Latino. This is approximately half of the proportion of Latinos in the United States population (US Census Bureau, 2003). Although it is possible that part of this discrepancy may be due to characters on television that are of ambiguous ancestry (meaning that the proportion of characters that are clearly identified as one ethnicity or another may not add up to 100%), it appears that the television media is underfocused on Latino characters. Many academics who study media presentations of ethnic minorities suggest that Latinos continue to be more often presented as perpetrators of crime, low income, functioning in less prestigious jobs, and tend to speak with thick accents more often than Caucasian characters. Thus the portrayal of Latinos on television tends to be more negative than for Caucasians.

Other ethnic groups have expressed similar concerns ranging from portrayals of Muslim women as passive and uneducated, Russians as involved in criminal mafias and Asians as rude and relegated to careers at convenience stores. Common to all of these concerns is that these stereotypes are being used as part of a hostile movement to deny immigrants the ability to integrate fully as equal members of American (or European) society.

Some academics have expressed concern that negative portrayals of immigrants in the media may work to harm the self-image and self-esteem of individuals from those ethnic backgrounds. However, many of those academics have noted that perceptions of whether a character portrayal is negative or not can be subjective. For example, one individual may find George Lopez' portrayal of Mexican-Americans as negative and

prejudicial, whereas another may find the stereotypical depictions as playful or even empowering (see Rivadeneyra, 2006 for an expanded discussion of this particular example). Similarly, the movie *Braveheart* may be said to play upon stereotypes of the Scots, but the movie is generally considered a positive portrayal of Scottish independence.

Given that perceptions of whether a portrayal of an individual immigrant in the media as negative or positive is subjective, quantifying the degree to which the media indulges in negative portrayals can be quite daunting. Indeed, it may largely depend upon who you ask. Academics, who as a group (and here this article risks its own stereotype, although Redding, 2001, provides a discussion on the biases that exist in academia) may be highly sensitive to perceived ethnic stereotypes may be quick to perceive them as negative. On the other side of the spectrum, media executives themselves may tend to be comparatively insensitive to how media depictions may be perceived. In between, the viewing public (immigrant and non-immigrant alike) may have a wide range of perceptions regarding the degree of prejudice and offensiveness seen in media depictions of immigrants. For example even children's cartoons such as *Powerpuff Girls* can be viewed either as promoting strong positive images of ethnic minorities (and females) or as promoting gender and ethnic prejudice.

Although much of the concern on media portrayals of immigrant populations focuses on Latinos, as this population is most prevalent in current immigration patterns, even subgroups of the “dominant” Caucasian culture complain about media portrayals. Most notably Italian-American groups continue to express concern over depictions of Italians as mafia related criminals in movies and television shows such as the *Sopranos*.

Authors such as Messina, while acknowledging that such stereotypes have a historical basis, argue that their overuse in the media continues to distort public perceptions of Italians in American society. Messina argues that despite membership in the ethnic “Caucasian” category, Italians are stigmatized and experience prejudice much like other non-majority ethnic groups. Similar concerns could be expressed about American Jews in the media, although again whether shows such as *Will and Grace* that portray Jewish stereotypes for laughs are promoting negative images or empowering Jews by parodying those stereotypes is largely subjective. Even the “banned” episode of *The Family Guy* in which the lead (cartoon) character sings a song in which he references the Jews of Palestine as responsible for the death of Christ raises arguments over whether the comment is genuinely anti-Semitic or intended as parody.

Ultimately proponents of this position see negative portrayals of immigrants in the media as harmful in several ways. First, as mentioned earlier, such portrayals may decrease immigrants’ self-perceptions and self-esteem. This may be offset somewhat when programming is available in the immigrants’ native language or from their native country. For example Mexican-Americans and other Latinos may benefit from the availability of Spanish language channels commonly available in the United States (particularly on cable).

Another concern is that negative portrayals of immigrants in the media may either promote prejudice against immigrants, or related but not identical, may simply fail to challenge those prejudices that are already held among the greater populace. The hope is that by increasing positive portrayals of immigrants in the media, non-immigrants may become more aware of and concerned for the issues that face immigrants to the United

States and may be more open to the integration of immigrant populations to American culture.

**Position B: Media Representations of Immigrant Populations Reflect Actual Differences Between Groups.**

An alternate argument would suggest that if immigrants are portrayed in the media in a manner that differs from non-immigrants, this may reflect actual group differences rather than prejudice. Put another way, the media portrays groups of people differently because those groups actually are qualitatively different. To use an extreme example, few would argue that the depictions of Nazi war-crimes perpetrators such as seen in *Schindler's List* constitute an unfair portrayal of Nazis as bigots and murderers. In this case, Nazis have a verified record of committed atrocities (despite the claims of Holocaust deniers) and thus their portrayal in the media as vicious war criminals has been earned through their collective group behavior. Although it may be true that some members of the Nazi party may have been genuinely kind compassionate individuals (for example, perhaps Albert Speer's public disavowal of his Nazi past redeems him somewhat), it is difficult to imagine that the common portrayals of Nazis in the media represents a prejudice toward Nazis.

Less extreme, but along the same logic, proponents of this alternate view argue that, although indeed different groups may be represented differently in the media, these presentations represent actual group differences. Such presentations may indeed be stereotypical, but stereotypes based on reality, and not prejudices. Put bluntly, proponents of this view argue that, for example, if Russians (and Italians) are portrayed as being involved with the mafia, this is because the Russian mafia has become a

considerable problem of interest relative to the criminal activities of other ethnic groups.

Given that media portrayals of any group are not consistent, this group difference is likely an overall frequency difference rather than a consistent and reliable one. In other words, comparing Russian immigrants to, say Pakistani immigrants, Russian immigrants may be portrayed as criminals more often than Pakistani immigrants. However there is, nonetheless, an abundance of media portrayals of Russians that do not involve crime, and at least some portrayals of Pakistanis that do. Any frequency difference noted in the media is merely reflective of a frequency difference in real life.

For example, related to Latinos many academics suggest that Latinos continue to be more often presented as perpetrators of crime, low income, functioning in less prestigious jobs, and tend to speak with thick accents more often than Caucasian characters. Proponents of this alternate view of the media and immigration would suggest that these portrayals of Latinos have less to do with prejudice toward Latinos in the media and more to do with actual social problems faced by Latinos. Indeed many academics do identify as challenges to Latino immigrants these very issues: low wages in less prestigious jobs (in fact raised by some as a point in support of lowered immigration restrictions), higher crime rates, and difficulties (for some) assimilating to English language and American culture. These issues are not unique to Latino immigrants, naturally, and may be simply part of the assimilation process. Proponents of this view might suggest that these portrayals are only currently relevant for Latinos, reflective of the status of many Latinos as relatively recent immigrants. Many immigrant cultures across history (Irish, Italians, Poles, Chinese, etc.) have experienced many of the same

stressors during early phases of immigration, and once several generations of Latinos have acculturated to the United States, these stressors will likely diminish.

It should be noted however that it is possible that these stereotypes, although initially based upon reality, may harden in the public consciousness and prove immutable even after the social circumstances that gave rise to them have changed. This is essentially the argument that Messina makes in regards to Italians. Namely, that their may be some historical truth to the Italian Mafioso stereotype, but the Italian Syndicate has long since diminished and stature and so few Italians have any connection with the mafia in current times that the stereotype has devolved into a full prejudice. That perhaps is one serious risk of “tolerating” stereotypes and leaving them unchallenged; namely that what begins as a neutral observation may become distorted over time and eventually used to oppress groups of people.

Another risk, perhaps, comes when relatively neutral observations of group differences are assigned value labels by other cultures that are then used to judge them negatively. For instance as noted earlier (Ferguson, 2004) Arabic women are often portrayed as submissive and oppressed by their Arabic husbands. This stereotype may have its origins in actual cultural differences between Arabic and Caucasian Americans, but may have been misinterpreted unfavorably the mainstream American culture. Specifically, Arabic women tend to address conflict with their husbands in a more indirect and subtle manner than is common for Caucasian women. Thus, what is in effect diplomacy, may be construed as passivity by another culture. Indeed, Arabic women often view themselves as the familial decision makers and the diplomacy merely a task of convincing the husband to agree to (or trick into thinking he came up with) a course of

action which the wife has already set upon. This is not to say that male oppression and domestic violence are not issues for Arabic women (as indeed honor killings and female circumcision make clear), but rather that these cultural issues are often more complex than is commonly perceived by other cultures (indeed many honor killings and female circumcisions are initiated by family matriarchs as well as by male family members). Naturally, male oppression and violence against women is also an issue for Caucasians.

Finally it should be noted that it is possible that negative stereotypes may indeed be based on actual group differences. However, were the media to portray these negative differences, yet fail to portray positive differences, this in and of itself would be an unfair and prejudicial portrayal of immigrant groups. Thus, the argument that media stereotypes of immigrants are based on actual groups differences can only be considered non-prejudicial if the media is presenting the cultural group in a well rounded fashion. For example, in regards to Latinos, does the media also portray the remarkable faith, cultural pride, and strong family ties that are common among Latinos, or are only the social difficulties faced by Latino immigrants presented. In the absence of quantified data (and few studies examine the frequency of *positive* stereotypes in the media) this issue unfortunately remains subjective.

#### *Using the Media to Reduce Prejudice.*

In the classic Robbers' Cave experiment, Sherif and colleagues randomized young boys to one of two summer camps. Initially the two groups of boys had no contact with each other and each group was encouraged to develop a group identity, name for the group, etc. When the groups came together for competitive activities, a great deal of hostility and prejudice were evidenced, even though the two groups were essentially

identical. However, the groups were indeed in competition over resources, particularly the rewards from the competitions. In essence, the Robbers' Cave experiment demonstrated that prejudice can result when groups of people are put in a position of conflict over finite resources. This is not entirely dissimilar from many of the concerns expressed in current US immigration debates. As such, the degree to which US-born individuals and non-US-born immigrants are seen as competing for limited resources in the US, prejudice may continue to be a concern.

In the Robbers' Cave experiment, prejudice was eventually reduced by setting up circumstances in which the two groups of boys had to cooperate to overcome mutual challenges, such as pushing a broken truck full of food into the camps. The same is likely true for US-born and immigrant populations in the US. The degree to which these populations are seen as cooperating on matters of mutual interest is likely to bear the best results in regards to reducing prejudice. Too often however, differences and conflict are emphasized, as was the case during recent protests over immigration reform in which some protesters flew foreign flags and parties on all sides of the debate highlighted differences between people rather than similarities. Ambivalence toward immigrant groups in the US-born population is likely to be reduced to the extent that immigrant groups are seen to be working toward the same goals as the US-born population.

To that degree, media outlets can play a role in fostering positive views of immigrant populations. Specifically, programming in which US-born individuals and foreign-born individuals are portrayed as working cooperatively toward a mutual goal are likely to be most useful in promoting positive views of people of all backgrounds. By contrast programming which emphasizes groups difference, even if of a satirical nature,

or with the intent of portraying immigrant groups in a positive light, and US-born populations in a negative light, are likely to foster ill feelings, rather than positive ones.

Portrayals of individuals from immigrant groups that emphasize their similarities to US-born individuals, and which portray them as advocating social views advocated by American culture (at least in a broad sense) are most likely to be helpful in reducing prejudice. To that extent, focusing on individuals as individuals, rather than representations of their cultures may be helpful. Stereotypes presented in the media may not necessarily be as biased as some academics suggest, but neither are they likely to foster increased assimilation and cooperation among immigrant groups. Ultimately, however, the presentation of stereotypes in the media is most likely to decline when public interest in viewing those stereotypes declines.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has attempted to both present and critically evaluate opposing views of media presentations of immigrant populations. This chapter has avoided the issue of whether the media purposefully propagates stereotypes of immigrant groups, and instead begun merely with the assumption that the media is reflective of societal attitudes (which may be confused and ambiguous rather than consistent).

In attempting to answer the question of whether media portrayals of immigrants are reflective of actual group differences, or prejudicial in nature, the simple answer is that, in all likelihood, there are examples of both in the media. Certainly, historically, the media has, at times, presented blatantly prejudicial and inflammatory presentations of African-Americans, Native Americans and other (non-immigrant) ethnicities, although these portrayals were themselves reflective of a less ethnically sensitive cultural past. In

response to changes in American culture over the past forty years, and criticisms from academia, the media has made strides to present a more diversified view of American culture. Undoubtedly, however, more progress is desirable. This is likely particularly true for the issue of immigration, which remains ambiguous in the public opinion. As such stereotypical depictions of immigrant populations in the media represent a risk fraught area in which prejudices may inadvertently be furthered.

Even if the media is not necessarily responsible for the development of prejudice in American culture (although prejudice is by no means a uniquely American or Western phenomenon) it can be argued that the media could be used as a force for positive change. At very least, by avoiding unfair prejudicial depictions, and presenting immigrant populations as well rounded cultural groups, the media may be capable of providing a positive arena for diversity, cultural exchange and acculturation. As is typical, the media will likely respond with such programming when the vast majority of viewers insist upon it.

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