

Social Group Stories in the Media and Child Development

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abstract

How do children and youth come to understand what it means to be a member of a particular race, gender, and other social groups? How do they come to hold beliefs about the groups that they do and do not belong to? Both news stories and fictional narratives that we are tuned into as a culture tell stories about what it means to be a member of a particular social group. In this review article, we relate the latest scientific knowledge on news and entertainment media representations of race, gender and other social categories and what they tell us about how these messages are taken in and processed by developing minds. We include research on identity development, social learning about members of other groups, and both positive and negative behavioral outcomes to cultural messages about race, gender, and other social categories. We offer recommendations for stakeholders to understand the role of the media in educating youth about race, gender and other social categories.

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Throughout their days, American children and adolescents are increasingly consuming media content.^{1,2} Because we are social creatures for whom relationships are imperative to survival, we seek connections to other people both in the real world and the vicarious world that entertainment media offers us. These experiences, whether with real people or fictitious characters, teach us the following about the social world: how to navigate it, and what others expect, believe, and assume about members of social groups, defined, among other social categories, by race, gender, sexual identity, and their intersections.³

Simply, understanding the nature of the messages children and adolescents receive from the media about both themselves and others as members of various social groups and what effect these messages have on children's and adolescents' thoughts and behaviors is a critical endeavor for anyone working with young people. We live in an age in which media are nearly unavoidable. Those who care about children and adolescents are painfully aware of the importance of these mediated realities simply by being exposed to some of the more serious effects of exposure such as eating disorders, sexual harassment, and racial violence. As such, we review research about the nature of media messages about social representations, what effect they have on developing children, and what recommendations can be made regarding responsible media use and production.

CURRENT STATE

What is the Nature of Media Messages About Social Representations?

Much research on the issue of social groups and their intersectionalities in the media has taken the form of systematic quantitative content

analyses examining how social groups are portrayed. For an overview regarding gender, see Scharrer,⁴ and see Behm-Morawitz and Ortiz⁵ for an overview of race. Generally, media messages about race and ethnicity have a tendency to rely on stereotyped misrepresentations (eg, the African-American "gangsta" ubiquitous to video games⁶) or a compelling absence notable by exceptions (eg, lack of representation of Native Americans and Asian Americans in film and television⁵). Media portrayals of gender are similarly limited in the nature of representation. Primarily, regardless of the genre or target audience demographic, men receive the lion's share of agentic roles, whereas women are primarily valued for their sexuality and appearance. In general, the shared culture that we access through media presents young, white, straight boys as the hegemonic or dominant group. Others (eg, women, Latinos, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, or queer individuals) are often marginalized and presented in limited roles. Media are thought to serve as a repository for social group norms and expectancies, and such patterns of representation become normalized for media audiences.⁵

What Effect Do Media Messages About Social Representation Have?

Research examining the effect of media representations can be categorized in 2 broad areas. First, how do these representations influence behavioral choices and attitudes about the self? Second, how do these messages influence behavioral choices and attitudes about others? Much of these 2 areas focus on the poor behavioral choices that potentially limit an individual's options or have the potential to harm.

Impact on the Self

Perhaps the most heavily researched area in this domain comes from research examining media portrayals

that emphasize beauty ideals and sexualization.⁷ The American Psychological Association Task Force on the sexualization of girls reported that objectification and sexualization of girls and women is common in a variety of media genres and that exposure to this material is related to a host of negative outcomes in the areas of cognitive and physical functioning, body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety, mental health (depression, self-esteem), and sexual well-being.⁸ Although many who work with adolescents are well aware of the range of problems that can result from identification with these types of images, it is important to understand that negative attitudes about body image and a desire to take (unhealthy) behavioral steps to conform to these ideals are seen in children as young as 5 years of age.

Recent research has found identification with Disney princesses and engagement with related products predicts female gender-stereotyped play that takes place 1 year later, even after controlling for previously existing gender-stereotyped play, in children 3 to 6.5 years.⁹ Similar associations exist with exposure to superhero¹⁰ and gendered television advertising,¹¹ illustrating the profound impact of media in shaping children's toy preferences and the nature of their play at a period in which play is so instrumental to social and cognitive development and construction of gender and racial identities.

In terms of identity, a research study found that young African American video gamers were more likely than young white gamers to identify with a same race avatar (white gamers identified equally with same or other race avatars) and to see themselves as similar to that avatar.¹² Given that most African American avatars in video games are criminals, perhaps it is unsurprising that these gamers experienced significantly lower levels of positive affect following game

play. Survey research with African American high school students has shown complex associations between media use and self-esteem. Frequency of viewing sports was negatively associated with 3 different types of self-esteem (performance, social, and racial), music video viewing was negatively associated with performance self-esteem, and identification with white characters was negatively associated with social self-esteem.¹³ On the other hand, although identification with African American characters was associated with positive appraisals of one's own appearance, there was no link between amount of viewing of media with primarily African American casts and self-esteem.

Researchers are just beginning to examine the impact of adopting media personas on developing identities, but enough data exist to be concerned about children of color's developing identities when their social group is represented as either absent or stereotyped. There is evidence from college students that stereotyped media images can induce stereotype threat, in which members of a negatively stereotyped group underperform consistent with the negative stereotypes.^{14,15} The outcomes that are negatively impacted include academic performance, career choice,^{14,16} disidentification with academics and impaired academic skill building,¹⁶ as well as hypertension and anxiety.¹⁷ These are serious concerns for physical and emotional health, as well as the developing self.

Impact on Others

Researchers have extensively examined how media messages influence our responses to members of various social groups. Mere awareness of the existence of a stereotype linking African Americans and violence predicts less stringent criteria for deciding to shoot an African American male character in

a video game but not a white male character.¹⁸ Researchers with similar work in regards to harmful choices and gender have found that media exposure is linked to increased acceptance of rape myths,¹⁹ decreased interest in seeking sexual consent, and decreased intentions to honor nonconsent.²⁰

A number of researchers have demonstrated that the way gender, race, and other social groups are portrayed in the media can influence attitudes (such as pro-African American attitudes), feelings (eg, by using a feelings thermometer to measure prejudice), thoughts (eg, implicit cognition tasks), and behavioral outcomes (eg, behavioral measures of voting preference) (see, for example, Dill and Burgess²¹; Ramasubramanian and Oliver²²), including attitudes toward policy and political judgments.^{22,23} Researchers conducting such studies have uncovered trends for long-term effects and for the importance of recency, vividness, and frequency of exposure in influencing thinking about race (see, for example, Mastro et al²⁴).

Positive Impacts

Recent work calls for the presentation of counterstereotypes or progressive racial and gender imagery to positively influence stereotypical beliefs.²⁵⁻³⁰ Recent research with children provides evidence that positive media messages reduce prejudice, in part because learning about others, even via media, allows children to see themselves in others. When teachers read fictional stories in which British children were friends with refugee children, prejudice was reduced compared with control children.³⁰ In another set of studies, children and adolescents read passages from the *Harry Potter* series relating to prejudice or a control reading.³⁰ Exposure to the *Harry Potter* series reduced prejudice

toward immigrants, refugees, and homosexuals, compared with controls. Both these media reduced prejudice by modeling cross-group friendships and reducing anxiety about cross-group contact.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research in media portrayals should do the following: recognize the importance of intersectionalities of social groups so that multiple aspects of identity (like gender and race) are considered side by side, recognize the importance of social media as well as new and developing media, focus on counterstereotypes as tools to supply more data about positive aspects of media representations, and extend these tools to apply to relational dynamics as well as outcomes that should be studied more frequently. This work should explore media representations with qualitative, quantitative, and critical studies methods. It is imperative that research include full representations of the diverse populations and geographical locations of children and youth and that special attention be given to comparative studies highlighting both individual differences and social and cultural group differences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In this article, we have mainly touched on 2 aspects of identity, gender, and race, although there is research about other important human categories, such as ethnic groups, people with disabilities, sexual identity, religious groups, etc. Given that a body of expert research knowledge has cataloged the negative effects of negative representations and the positive effects of healthy representations of social groups, our first recommendation for the media industry, policy makers, educators, pediatricians, and all other stakeholders is to take seriously that cultural stories shape the lives

of children as well as adults: avoid thinking that the ubiquity of media or their entertainment value means that they are trivial or insignificant.

Clinicians and Providers

We recommend that clinicians and providers engage in bridging efforts with researchers, policy makers, and educators to provide children with representations of a socially just world that will contribute to their self-image, relationships with others, and well-being, and that will contribute to their healthy development as productive members of our society. In addition to recommending limits and

suggestions for use, we recommend fully explaining to parents why and how media matter.

Policy Makers

We recommend that policy makers engage in bridging efforts with researchers, the media industry, clinicians and providers, and seek input on policy guidelines from researchers who are publicly engaged in sharing scholarship with diverse audiences in accessible ways.

Educators

Educators need to invest in media literacy initiatives and

curricula and to collaborate with nongovernmental organizations working for social justice. They should talk to children and teens about how the stories they see tell them who they are and help them to understand where the stories came from and what their own role is in determining their destiny. Understand that the content and the frequency of exposure matters in children's development. Find counterstereotypes and make sure children are exposed to these. Open a dialogue with them about their perspectives. Finally, listen and learn from your children's perspectives.

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