Racial Stereotypes in The Wire

Sarah Ubdogafar

250684765

SOCIOLOG 3373

Maria-Carolina Cambre

3/18/2015

RACIAL STEREOTYPES IN THE WIRE

Carson Kressley said it best, "people are much deeper than stereotypes. That's the first place our minds go. Then you get to know them and you hear their stories, and you say, 'I'd have never guessed'" (IMDB, 2015). Unfortunately, not everybody has this experience, this 'aha moment', and they live their entire lives stereotyping others. It is not often that stereotypes are refuted because stereotypes act as barriers between people, which prevent individuals from associating with those from stigmatized groups. Individuals rarely disregard stereotypes that are attributed to certain racial groups and formulate their own opinions based on personal experience(s). In addition, individuals who stereotype those of other racial groups do not even consider themselves to be doing so, as stereotypes are presented as truth. How racial groups are presented in the media is not helpful in eliminating the prevalence of racial stereotypes within society. Television especially is a powerful media platform in which racial stereotypes are routinely perpetuated. Moreover, the ways in which racial stereotypes are reinforced in television is problematic because individuals are subtly yet undoubtedly influenced by the media. Television is a media form that plays an essential role in communicating certain attitudes, norms, values, and understandings to mainstream society. In particular, I will examine the pervasiveness of racial stereotypes incorporated within the television show, *The Wire*, as a media form.

Racial stereotypes in television are a significant social issue because they negatively label and marginalize racial groups within society on a national scale. Stereotypes are particular characteristics, attitudes and values, and/or lifestyles that are attributed to a group (Charles, 2009). Most evidently, racial stereotypes subject an entire group to prejudice, discrimination, and other forms of ill-treatment due to the darkness of the pigment of their skin. Most importantly, racial stereotypes are not accurate representations of an entire race. A common misconception about racial stereotypes is that they are true. More often than not, racial stereotypes are negative

over-representations of a group (Charles, 2009). The bad characteristics, attitudes and values, and/or lifestyles of the few are unjustly attributed to the entire race. The reason why racial stereotypes in television specifically are a social problem is due to how impactful television is as a media form. As of 2009, 99% of all American households owned at least one television and 66% of American homes owned three or more televisions (Isaacs, 2010). On average, Americans fifteen and older spend 2.8 hours per day watching television (Isaacs, 2010). Since 2009, these numbers and statistics have most likely increased. Therefore, television is a central focus in many American households. Individuals consciously and unconsciously trust and believe what they see on television.

The African-American community is subjected to many racial stereotypes. As a result of how marginalized the African-American community is from mainstream society, television programs are a significant source of information on African-Americans and has a large impact on how African-Americans are perceived by the general public (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). According to recent findings, viewers believe that the ways in which African-Americans are depicted in television are accurate reflections of how African-Americans are in reality (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). I believe that this is made easier due to lack of experience(s) with people of other races. Thus, television shows formulate the viewers opinion for themselves. A survey held in 1990 showed that a vast majority of the general public associates Blacks with violent street crimes (Welch, 2007). This is not simply an "American thing"; Canadian studies reveal that racialization of crime directly impacts how Canadians perceive racial minorities. Nearly half of those surveyed believe that there is a correlation between race and criminality and, of those, 65% thought that Blacks committed more crimes than any other racial or ethnic group (Welch, 2007).

In the television show *The Wire*, there is a racial stereotype being demonstrated in nearly every scene. The storyline is told from two distinct perspectives—the viewpoints of Baltimore police and the viewpoints of African-American residents who are mostly drug dealers. From the point of view of both the Baltimore police and the Black community, racial stereotypes are reinforced in regards to Black males. When the narrative is told from the perspective of Baltimore police, the viewer feels as though they are a police officer themselves and is being trusted with vital information that only police know. When the narrative is told from the perspective of the Black community, the viewer feels as though they are a trusted ally or friend. However, although the inclusion of both perspectives seems like a balanced and unbiased approach by the creators of the show, it is quite the opposite. The inclusion of both White security and Black deviance provides a thrill for the viewer, but ultimately reduces the existence of African-American males to commonly held racial stereotypes. On one hand, racial stereotypes are presented to the viewer by Baltimore police, and on the other hand, racial stereotypes are legitimized to the viewer by the African-American characters that embody derogatory attributes, norms, values, and lifestyles. I will examine the depiction of the primary character within the show, a black male, Avon Barksdale. Barksdale is a typecast of the typical African-American male according to racial stereotypes in American society. Subtly, yet powerfully, the presence of this character, along with several like him, legitimizes commonly held beliefs about African-American males to viewers. That may seem like an oxymoron but in the case of television, things like racial stereotypes go without saying because they are so well understood. This is why the subtleness of racial stereotypes are powerful.

The primary character, Avon Barksdale, is one of the most dominant and high-ranking African-American drug kingpins in Baltimore. Barksdale is in his early thirties and drug

trafficking is how he makes a living. Similar to the character of Avon Barksdale, prominent images of Black males in the media are that of criminals and those who are unemployed (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). Barksdale controls the whole drug trade in West Baltimore. The Barksdale organization is primarily set up in the Franklin Terrace tower blocks and low-rise projects referred to as "The Pit". Barksdale, born in 1970, grew up in the Franklin Terrace tower blocks that he controls now. Barksdale was mentored by his father, who took him under his wing and taught him how to survive in the rough neighborhoods and drug game of West Baltimore. Eventually, Barksdale worked his way up the ladder and became the most powerful and feared man in West Baltimore, if not all of Baltimore. In addition, Barksdale is seen as a provider for much of the Black community. Barksdale employs much of the African-American community, recruiting the young males at a very young age; as young as fourteen. Although Barksdale is depicted as a leader in many ways, his good intentions are often overshadowed by his bad actions. Barksdale is very trustworthy and loyal. However, consistently throughout the storyline, Avon displays many of the commonly held stereotypes about Black men in American society; that they are criminally involved, a threat to the community, uneducated, and unemployed (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). Poverty, deviance, and other negative aspects of the African-African community are intensified on television (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008).

Barksdale is also presented to have no sense of morality. Not only is Barksdale a drug dealer who recruits younger males, Barksdale is also responsible for many murders. Barksdale determines who will be killed for whatever reason that he deems worthy. Throughout the series, individuals are killed for making mistakes that attracted police attention, cost the Barksdale organization money, or embarrassed or betrayed the Barksdale organization by fraternizing with rivals or police. In the first episode, Barksdale orders the killing of a witness for testifying

against his nephew in court (Simon, West, Doman, Faison, Gillen, Lovejoy, Peters, 2008). This quick response to violence that Barksdale has, as well as several characters like him, creates the notion that African-American males are inherently violent beings who should be feared. This myth leads the general public to fear African-American males in reality (Monk-Turner, Martinez, Holbrook, Hervey, 2007). However, what viewers do not know is that television programs are supposedly meant to entertain, not educate. Crime shows display myth as truth, much like many other media forms. The depictions of African-Americans in television and the racial stereotypes concerning them can be applied to the Cultivation Theory by George Gerbner and Larry Gross (Shanahan and Morgan, 1999). The Cultivation Theory argues that individuals who watch high contents of television, which we have concluded is most Americans over the age of fifteen, are not able to differentiate between what are real and what is fictional (Isaacs, 2010). Furthermore, viewers will begin to believe that they are living in a world similar to that which is portrayed on screen (Isaacs, 2010).

How Avon Barksdale is introduced in the first episode of the show is meant to set the tone for how the viewer is supposed to feel about him. Within the first couple of scenes, Barksdale is introduced to the viewer in one bold statement that belittles his value and worth as a person. The major of the Baltimore Homicide Unit refers to Barksdale's character in this brief but impactful statement: "I'm upstairs answering questions about some project nigger I have never heard of whose supposedly beat my unit out of ten fucking murders" (Simon, West, Doman, Faison, Gillen, Lovejoy, Peters, 2008). The viewer is already being influenced by this claim of who Avon is as a person before they are able to formulate their own judgment and opinion of him for themselves. Whether the viewer is aware of it or not, their judgment and opinion is being formulated for them. The setting in which the viewer first sees Barksdale is

noteworthy, too. The viewer first sees Barksdale in Orlando's Strip Club in episode one (Simon,

West, Doman, Faison, Gillen, Lovejoy, Peters, 2008). The setting meant to make the audience

perceive Avon in a negative light; that he is a misogynist who degrades women. The framing and

angles that the scene is captured in are significant as well. Barksdale is situated in a room

upstairs, overlooking the strip club and everyone inside of it, as if he is God-like or superior to

others (Simon, West, Doman, Faison, Gillen, Lovejoy, Peters, 2008). The language that the

writers chose for Barksdale to articulate himself with is also important. Here is some of the

language that Barksdale uses in the first episode that is meant to add to his stereotypical Black

male image.

> I)   "We could run more than corners" - Stringer
> "Like business men?" - Avon
> "I ain't no suit-wearin' businessman like you…you know? I'm
> just a gangsta, I suppose…and I want my corners" - Avon
> (Simon, West, Doman, Faison, Gillen, Lovejoy, Peters, 2008).
>
> II)   "You know the difference between me and you? I bleed red
> and you bleed green. I look at you these days, String, you
> know what I see? I see a man without a country. Not hard
> enough for this right here and maybe, just maybe, not smart
> enough for them out there." - Avon [to Stringer] (Simon,
> West, Doman, Faison, Gillen, Lovejoy, Peters, 2008).

The dialogue and discourse around Barksdale by Baltimore police and the African-American

community is legitimized by the way in which he acts, speaks, and carries himself. Avon's

actions, mannerisms, and how he articulates himself attempt to make the stereotypical African-

American male image true.

      According to Stuart Hall, representation is a societal tool that is used to interpret

symbolic meaning (Berger, 2006). Hall attempts to break down the ideas of culture. Stuart Hall

argues that things such as labels and stereotypes do not have innate meaning; it is individuals

who create meanings and correlate them to certain things (Berger, 2006). Therefore, culture is

not a set of things such as television shows, music, clothing, or comics. Culture is a structure of

practices that create and transmit meaning (Berger, 2006). The question that needs to be asked is

not what does this mean, but what is it doing? Hall goes on to say that in every image, movie, or

other form of representation, there is a preferred meaning (Berger, 2006). A preferred meaning

involves two or more interpretations, but one interpretation is designed to be more compelling to

the viewer than the other(s) (Berger, 2006). For instance, popular character binaries are heroism

and villainy. Strategies that are used to help push certain interpretations include imagery and

language (Berger, 2006). The most effective way to successfully present a preferred meaning

that the viewer will believe is to provide complete coherence. For example, in regards to Avon

Barksdale's character in *The Wire*, the writers ensured that he fit the typecast of the typical Black

male stereotype. Barksdale's character is criminally involved, a threat to the community,

uneducated, unemployed. There is coherence in Barksdale's character; his personality traits, his

language, his lack of employment, his deviance, are all consistent with the typical Black male

stereotype.

Stuart Hall also argues that minorities are often represented in binaries (Berger, 2006). A

binary is something that is relating to, composed of, or involving two things (Lenoir, 1994).

Binaries include polar opposites such as good or bad and civilized or primitive (Lenoir, 1994).

Binaries are challenging because every individual is unique but their identity is reduced to

binaries. Binaries leave no room for anything or anybody to fall in between. Therefore, when it

comes to race, specifically African-American males, the binaries consist of the law-abiding

citizen or the criminal, the intelligent or the unintelligent, the professional or the unemployed.

Racial stereotypes are a prime example of binaries that are reductionistic. The uniqueness of an
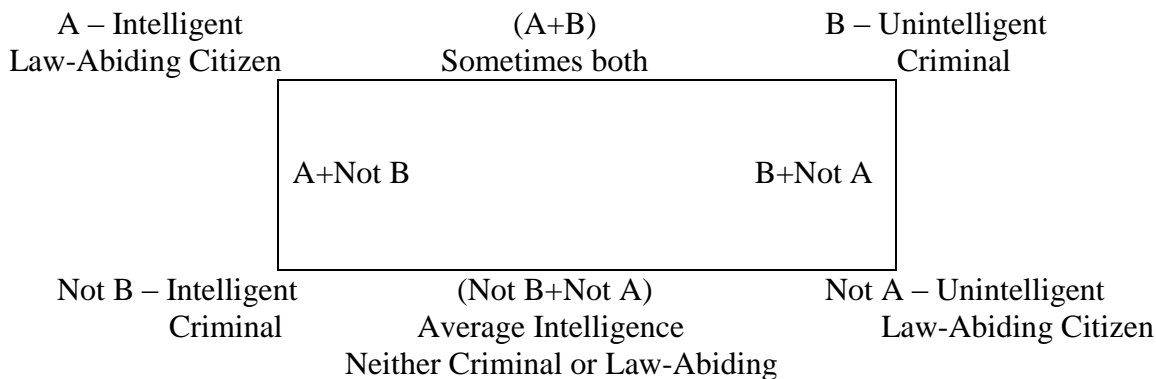
entire race cannot be reduced to a few hurtful labels such as being violent and stupid. Also, minorities do not encompass the power to define themselves and how they are perceived. Hall takes his argument one step further and states that there are great power imbalances that exist within society (Berger, 2006). There are groups who have the power to define themselves and others and there are groups who lack power and are defined by others (Berger, 2006). How people and things are represented, good or bad, accurately or falsely, is based on political power (Berger, 2006).

Binaries can be de-constructed and topics can be examined more complexly through the semiotic square. The semiotic square is a tool for analysis that was developed by Algirdas Greimas (Lenoir, 1994). The semiotic square is used to examine multi-faceted topics that need to be analyzed well beyond reductive oppositional binaries. Binaries are made up of two contrary options. However, the semiotic square provides at least eight options to perceive any given topic. In a semiotic square, there are four corners; A, B, not B, not A (Lenoir, 1994). Additionally, there are options from reference point to reference point; A+B, A + not B, B + not A, not B + not A (Lenoir, 1994). The semiotic square is a technique that aims to identify differences. Moreover, the semiotic square reveals that these differences are multi-dimensional. In regards to Avon Barksdale, his character is subjected to racial binaries. Barksdale's character is depicted as bad in all aspects; he is criminally involved, a threat to the community, uneducated, unemployed because he is not a law-abiding citizen with no criminal record, exceptionally intelligent, a doctor, lawyer, or engineer. The writers of *The Wire* did not create Barksdale's character to be in between because then he would not perpetuate the racial stereotypes concerning African-Americans and cater to the custom and popularity of binaries. The following is a semiotic square of racial stereotypes regarding African-American males:

A – Intelligent   (A+B)   B – Unintelligent
Law-Abiding Citizen   Sometimes both   Criminal

A+Not B   B+Not A

Not B – Intelligent   (Not B+Not A)   Not A – Unintelligent
Criminal   Average Intelligence   Law-Abiding Citizen
                    Neither Criminal or Law-Abiding

The semiotic square above symbolizes the limiting affect of binaries in depicting

characters in the television show *The Wire*, much like other standard American television shows.

Racial binaries reduce a distinct individual to few attributes, which are usually cliché and

imprecise. For every one good character trait or action, there are two, three, or four bad character

traits or actions that follow. The character of Avon Barksdale in *The Wire* attests to this. What

are missing in television shows are African-American characters, or even simply particular

character traits in African-American characters, that are admirable instead of dishonorable.

Viewers will be less likely to believe that the representations that they are being shown on screen

are accurate when they see variety.

As much as American society is presented in a way in which it has advanced in regards to

race relations and prejudiced attitudes there are underlying racial stereotypes that are still

prevalent in contemporary society. For example, racial stereotypes are evident in television.

Television especially is a powerful media platform in which racial stereotypes are routinely

perpetuated. Moreover, the ways in which racial stereotypes are reinforced in television is

problematic because individuals are subtly yet undoubtedly influenced by the media. Racial

stereotypes in television are a social issue because of lack of accuracy and diversity of people of

colour on screen. In particular, African-American males are depicted negatively on television as

racial stereotypes are routinely perpetuated. Their attitudes and values, and/or lifestyles are

presented as correct reflections of the entire race. Racism and other forms of discrimination are

still barriers that we need to overcome as a society, but progress cannot be achieved without

acknowledging and discussing the media form that it has taken on.

Work Cited

Berger A. "Stuart Hall. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices". Making Sense of Media: Key Texts in Media and Cultural Studies. (Malden: Routledge), 2006. Pages 166-175.

Henrietta, C. (2009). Stereotypes conveyed in television. *Communications Department, Santa Monica College*, 10.

Isaacs, S. T., & Horney, J. Portrayal of African Americans in the Media: An Examination of Law and Order. *The Penn State McNair Journal*, 158.

Kressley, C (2015). Quotes. *IMDB*.

Lenoir, T. (1994). Was the last turn the right turn? The semiotic turn and AJ Greimas. *Configurations*, *2*(1), 119-136.

Monk-Turner, E., Martinez, H., Holbrook, J., & Harvey, N. (2007). Are reality TV crime shows continuing to perpetuate crime myths. *The Internet Journal of Criminology*, 1-15.

Punyanunt-Carter, N. M. (2008). The perceived realism of African American portrayals on television. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, *19*(3), 241-257.

Simon, D., West, D., Doman, J., Faison, F., Gillen, A., Lovejoy, D., Peters, C., ... Warner Home Video (Firm). (2008). *The Wire: Season 1*. New York, N.Y.: HBO Video.

Shanahan, J., & Morgan, M. (1999). *Television and its viewers: Cultivation theory and research*. Cambridge University Press.

Welch, K. (2007). Black criminal stereotypes and racial profiling. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, *23*(3), 276-288.