

Effects of Exposure to Racial and Gender Stereotypes in the Media on Minority Youths' Racial In-Group Attitudes, Gender Attitudes, and Self-Esteem

An individual's *race* and *gender* are central to how they are perceived in the world. This is evident not only in daily life, but also in the media, particularly in films. Largely viewed by young people, film representations of minority groups in *stereotypical* and *counter-stereotypical* roles can have a profound impact on the actual treatment of these groups, especially as racial and gender discrimination remain a concern.¹ *In-group attitudes* (i.e., how one feels about being a member of a specific group) and the process by which children learn the norms and expectations for males and females in their culture (i.e., *gender socialization*) initially form in childhood, but significantly take shape in adolescence.^{1,2} The purpose of this study is to **examine how being exposed to racial and gender stereotypes in films affects minority youths' racial in-group attitudes, gender attitudes, and overall self-esteem.**

Background and Rationale: Social scientists have proposed a number of theories to explain the role of media in society. For example, influential psychologist Albert Bandura's *social cognitive theory* suggests that the media teaches children about societal norms by providing them with models that they can learn from.³ Other theories, such as the *social identity theory*, suggests that belonging to a "valued group" can have positive psychological effects (e.g., boosting self-esteem and in-group attitudes), whereas association with a "devalued group" can elicit negative psychological effects (e.g., a deflated sense of self-worth).^{1,4} Adolescents are especially vulnerable to such outcomes as they tend to consume media at higher rates than the rest of the general population.⁵ This is a cause for concern given that exposure to media not only shapes perceptions about a group, but may also affect individual self-esteem.^{1,6} If the media regularly depicts minority groups in *stereotypical* roles (e.g., American Indians as spiritual beings in-tune with nature in *Pocahontas*), as opposed to *counter-stereotypical* roles (e.g., a Black king leading a technologically advanced nation in *Black Panther*), then members of this racial in-group may no longer feel proud about this part of their identity.⁷ Although a number of studies have examined how exposure to racial stereotypes in the media (e.g., television) can influence negative attitudes in White audiences toward people of color, few studies have investigated these effects specifically in minority communities. Thus, **I will investigate how being exposed to racially stereotypical and counter-stereotypical representations of minority groups influence the racial in-group attitudes and self-esteem of minority youth.**

Just as racial stereotypes are often reinforced in the media, so are gender stereotypes, even in children's media. For example, in most Disney Princess films, the princess must be rescued by her "Prince Charming" in order to live "happily ever after", perpetuating the notion that girls are weak and unable to save themselves. Being exposed to these messages can have a significant impact on female and male attitudes about gender.⁸ As children develop, there is an increased pressure to conform to norms specific to their gender (e.g., boys should not show emotions), particularly once they reach early adolescence, as suggested in the *gender intensification hypothesis*.⁹ It is also important to note that race plays a major role in gender stereotypes such that being a *feisty Latina* or a *strong Black woman* become real-life expectations for women in these communities.¹⁰ While previous research has explored gender stereotypes in the media and how they can affect gender attitudes, few studies have focused solely on the experiences of young people of color. Hence, **I will analyze the effects of exposure to gender**

stereotypical and counter-stereotypical representations of men and women on minority youths' gender attitudes and self-esteem.

Proposed Study: This study will consist of a content analysis, focus groups, and self-report questionnaires. In order to understand the type of information that young people are being exposed to, four coders will **first** analyze how men, women, and racial minorities are portrayed in the highest-grossing animated and non-animated film (i.e., based on box-office sales) of each year between 1988 and 2018 (i.e., 60 films in total). **Next**, we will recruit participants through community centers and after school programs (e.g., Boys and Girls Club) for focus groups. As racial in-group attitudes and gender attitudes become more salient in early and middle adolescence, the desired age range for participants will be between 10- and 17-years-old. For all participants, consent forms will be sent home for a parent/guardian to review and with their permission, adolescents will be given an assent form to fill out that indicates their willingness to participate in the study. Participants will also be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. Since the target population in this study is minority youth, the responses of young people who identify as a racial minority (e.g., Black, Latinx) or mixed race are of particular interest to me.

Participants will then be shown a set of 10 scenes from the films analyzed in the first part of this study and given the opportunity to discuss their thoughts with a moderator. The moderator will also ask young people whether they think the character shown is represented in a *positive* or *negative* way and how this makes them feel about themselves. All focus groups will be audio-recorded to keep track of participant responses. **Lastly**, to further examine the association between exposure to stereotypes in the media and self-esteem, participants will be administered a questionnaire with items from the *State Self-Esteem Scale* (e.g., "I feel good about myself"), a 20-item scale that measures how young people feel about themselves at a given timepoint, such as at that moment.¹¹ **I hypothesize that being exposed to characters in *stereotypical* roles will negatively affect minority youths' racial in-group attitudes, gender attitudes, and self-esteem, while exposure to characters in *counter-stereotypical* roles will have a positive effect.**

Intellectual Merit and Broader Impacts: Integrating approaches from developmental psychology, social psychology, and communications, the proposed study will further our understanding of how exposure to racial and gender stereotypes in the media directly impacts minority youth and how it shapes the ways that these young people are perceived in the world. Results will shed light on the potential negative effects that the media can have on child and adolescent development and what we as a society can do to change this. Future research should examine how the portrayal of gender in films influences young people who identify as transgender or non-binary. Since gender is treated as a binary construct in most media content, examining how being exposed to these representations affect transgender and non-binary youth is an important next step. Future studies should also explore whether media representations can influence other aspects of life such as career aspirations. Women and racial minorities may be more interested in pursuing a career in STEM if scientists are portrayed by people who look like them. By disseminating my findings at research conferences and in peer-reviewed journals, as well as through collaborations with executives at major film studios, my intent is to stimulate a broader conversation about the media's role in ensuring the positive development of *all* young people, no matter their race or gender. **References:** 1 Tukachinsky *et al* (2017) *J Broadcast Electron Media*. 2 Ward (2003) *Dev Rev*. 3 Bandura (2001) *Media Psychol*. 4 Tajfel & Turner (1986) *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. 5 Arnett (1995) *J Youth Adolesc*. 6 Ward (2004) *Dev Psychol*. 7 Fryberg *et al*. (2008) *Basic Appl Soc Psych*. 8 Coyne *et al* (2016) *Child Dev*. 9 Hill & Lynch (1983) *Girls at Puberty*. 10 Anyiwo *et al* (2018) *J Black Psychol*. 11 Heatherton & Polivy (1991) *J Pers Soc Psychol*.