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Latino Stereotypes in Television

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Author's Note

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Abstract

As we've seen numerous examples of in English television shows, Latinos and Latinas often are portrayed in ways that are consistent with stereotypes. Latino men are often portrayed as violent criminals or gangbangers who are bad to women and Latina women are often portrayed as being very sexual often having roles as prostitutes and things of that nature as well as being very loud mouthed and obnoxious. The purpose of this research paper is to expose how Latinos are almost never portrayed as mainstream characters, often being portrayed as sidekicks or lowlifes. This paper will also seek to expose how Latino characters are portrayed as more violent on English television than on Spanish television and how these stereotypes in English television are so recognizable and deeply rooted that even young children are very familiar with the stereotypes that are being portrayed. This research paper will reference several articles that take into account Latino and Latina perceptions of themselves on English television.

Key Words: Latinos, Latinas, Television, Stereotypes, Children

Latino Stereotypes in Television

In this day and age, it seems to be common knowledge that Latinos and Latinas aren't viewed as mainstream characters in TV shows. Despite being the largest minority in the United States few, if any, TV shows, namely English speaking ones, feature Latino or Latina characters who star as the protagonist. Often it seems that Latinos are portrayed as gangsters or criminals who are bad to women while Latinas are portrayed as extremely loud and obnoxious or as prostitutes or maids. These characteristics are particularly common in, again, English-language television. Many of these stereotypes also seem to be recognizable by children with some of them even being portrayed in TV commercials meant for children. English-language TV also shows Latinos to be more violent than their portrayals in Spanish-language TV. Latinos always seem to be portrayed as sidekicks at best, more often being portrayed as lowlifes. Many Latino actors have pointed this out and have accused Hollywood of depriving them of mainstream roles. English-language television has seen a consistent portrayal of Latinos as criminals and a consistent portrayal of Latinas as obnoxious prostitutes and maids.

The first major subject I would like to go into detail about in the difference in Latino and Latina portrayals in English-language TV vs. Spanish-language TV. In a study done by Ortiz and Behm-Morawitz conducted in 2015 it was found that, despite Latinos and Latinas consisting of 17% of the U.S. population that only 5% of TV portrayals were of Latino and Latina characters. In addition, Latinos were portrayed as more lazy on English-language TV than on Spanish-language TV. Latinas tended to receive similar treatment, often being much more obnoxious and loud as well as more provocatively dressed than white women on English-language TV. Unsurprisingly, these constant negative portrayals of Latinos and Latinas make English-language TV look very unattractive to a Hispanic audience. This study also found that Latinos and Latinas

view television more than any other medium in the United States. This is especially important when significant portions of Latino and Latina TV viewers want to see characters they are similar to and characters that they can relate to which can be very difficult to do when the only Latino and Latina characters on TV are portrayed as the stereotypical lazy Latino or the stereotypical loud, obnoxious, sex-toy Latina.

The next major subject I would like to cover is the more specific Latino and Latina portrayals and the consequences of those portrayals on a Hispanic audience. Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, and Kopacz further elaborated that Latinos and Latinas are restricted to a small number of parts including, and often limited to, comic-relief characters, criminals, law enforcers, and sex objects (2008). These stereotypes in television are a subtle form of racism and can directly lead to judgements by Caucasian TV viewers and possibly others who don't know any better simply believing Latinos and Latinas to be exactly what is portrayed on TV. These portrayals can also lead to low self-esteem by Hispanic English-language TV viewers. The stereotypes on television can make Hispanic audiences believe that they are simply a lazy Latino or obnoxious Latina when they are often much more than that. Additional characteristics that we see of Latinos and Latinas on television include limited intelligence, inarticulate speech, laziness, and verbal aggression. In addition, many, if not all, Latino and Latina characters we see during this period tend to be lacking in education.

Now, I would like to further address how Latinos and Latinas are affected in the world of English-language TV stereotypes. According to Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi, Latinos and Latinas have seen a consistent pattern of underrepresentation for decades (2017). Even today, it is seldom that we see a Latino or Latina character, let alone one who doesn't fit the usual stereotypes. In recent years, we have seen a small improvement, with the "unintelligent Latino"

stereotype being used less frequently. However, we still frequently see the crook Latino and overly-sexual Latina stereotypes. As I've mentioned before, these portrayals can have a negative impact on the self-esteem of Latinos and Latinas as well as some other minority groups including African-Americans, who experience this but to a lesser extent than Latinos and Latinas. Hopefully, measures are being taken to represent Latinos and Latinas better on English-language TV as well as diminishing the stereotypes we've seen for decades.

In addition to what I have stated earlier, I would like to elaborate on how television commercials on children's TV portray racism. In a study conducted by Maher, Herbst, Childs, and Finn, they found that on commercials played on children's TV that often the main characters of these commercials were white or Asian children, seldom black or Latino (2008). It was also seen in these commercials that the white and Asian children rarely interacted with black or Latino children. Latinos, Latinas, and African-Americans tend to have less major roles in these commercials. They consistently have minor roles and background roles. This is important because, from a young age, children are influenced easily and when they see commercials where they, being white or Asian children, don't interact with black or Latino children they can easily transfer that over to real life. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Latino and African-American children may not see themselves as "main characters" and this can, as I've mentioned before, result in them having a diminished sense of value. It is important that children can recognize themselves as "main characters" and can see themselves interacting with people who may come from different backgrounds.

Next, Hollywood has been called out by Latino actors for not featuring Latinos as mainstream characters. Specifically, Jimmy Smits, a veteran Latino actor, has called out Hollywood (Mittelstadt, 1997). He speaks for many Latino actors and Latina actresses when he

says that Latinos and Latinas rarely receive roles as main characters and are always subject to the usual Latino stereotypes we see on television. Hollywood rarely shines the light on Latino actors and when they do it is too often the same negative stereotypes we have seen time and time again. It is suggested that Hollywood directors don't view Latinos as mainstream individuals and that it's "unbelievable" for them to be seen as educated and normal. However, Hollywood's top lobbyist, Jack Valenti, believes that Hollywood does not discriminate. Jack Valenti was quoted as saying that it's "the least discriminatory business I've ever seen in my life".

Additionally, children of all backgrounds are familiar with racial stereotypes portrayed on television. According to Lois Salisbury, the head of a commission which studied this topic, kids can recognize stereotypes from a very young age and are aware of the ability of the media to shape people's opinions (Study Finds Kids Know Television Stereotypes, 1998). The study found that only two Latino children between 10 to 17 years old out of 10 said that they see their race frequently on television. Also, only 20% of the children involved in the study believe that there are enough Latinos on TV. Finally, the study found that children are more likely to associate positive qualities with white characters and negative qualities with minority characters.

Next, I would like to make some additional comments about the differences between Latino portrayals on English-language television and Spanish-language television. Latinos are more violent on English-language television than on Spanish-language television. According to Huff, "A majority of Hispanic TV viewers report that Latinos are more likely to be portrayed as violent on English-speaking television than Spanish-speaking channels" (1998). In a survey that was conducted, it was found that seven out of 10 Hispanics said that when they see Hispanics on English-language news that it is almost always about crime or immigration. However, 56% of whites said that they did not believe the coverage of Latinos to be negative. Also, Hispanic

parents said that they do not believe that English-language TV presents positive role models for their children.

Finally, I would like to discuss how the stereotypes of Latinos and Latinas on TV stand out as some of the most prominent. The main difference between stereotypes of Latinos and Latinas as opposed to others is that they are portrayed as the least articulate, have the most emphasized accents, dress poorly, and have many conversations revolving around crime and violence (Rivadeneira, 2006). In addition to this, they are much more likely to be cast as lawbreakers than any other ethnic group, specifically whites. Also, they are quite possibly the worst represented ethnic group on television. There is also a significant correlation between poor academic outcomes and television stereotypes for young Latinos. The portrayals we see on television too often cause Latinos and Latinas to function poorly and have difficulty overcoming obstacles. These facts are important because the portrayals of Latinos and Latinas on television are so significantly absurd compared to reality and it is effecting not only the self-esteem as well as the success rates of Latinos and Latinas but it is also effecting how they are viewed by other ethnic groups, specifically the dominant group, that being white Americans. These portrayals that have been going on for decades are continuing to poison our increasingly diverse society that we see are seeing in America, consisting largely now of Hispanic-Americans, which exist as the largest minority group in the United States.

In conclusion, Latinos and Latinas are continuing to be stereotyped in English-language television that is viewed by practically every demographic in America. We have seen very little improvement over the past few decades, with the lazy Latino or the violent, crook Latino and extremely sexual, loud, obnoxious Latina still being common, popular stereotypes on television. Latinos and Latinas are frequently having their self-esteem impacted in negative ways and

sometimes having this negatively impact the many other pieces of their lives, as well. White children as well as others recognize how little their characters interact with minorities on television and when that mixes with seeing the negative, stereotypical portrayals of Latinos and Latinas it makes it difficult for people from different backgrounds to come together as brothers and sisters. Children of all races begin seeing and understanding these stereotypes from a young age causing underrepresented groups like Latinos and Latinas to value themselves less and not believe they can be “main characters” and causing white children to believe that they alone are the “main characters” making it more and more unbelievable when we see a normal, educated, Latino or Latina on TV. There needs to be a change in what people of all ages and demographics are seeing of Latinos and Latinas on television if we are to break the barrier that divides us.

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