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Visualizing Microaggressions in Primetime Television

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Abstract

Through an examination of pilot episodes from two primetime television shows told from the perspective of people of color, this study looks closely at how microaggressions are displayed and engaged with. Through a discourse analysis in combination with critical race theory, the way in which microaggressions are made visual help legitimize the impact these microaggressions have for people of color in everyday life. By looking at *Black-ish* and *Fresh Off the Boat*, the study showed how people of color silently react to this silent form of racism. There is a depicted struggle prevalent in both shows as the characters of color must assimilate to predominantly white environments. These television shows provide counternarratives to the common, mainstream narrative seen through a white lens as depicted on most primetime television shows.

Introduction

There are endless studies regarding representation in media and the importance of representation. Representation is important both in terms of number of people of color visible in media as well as the variety of roles and characters that are displayed. People have examined the stereotypes created and perpetuated through media and the various ways in which people of color are presented. Research has shown the media to be "an effective tool in teaching sociological concepts and theories regrading race, class, and gender inequality" (Khanna & Harris, 2015). Whether these lessons are actively learned or passively absorbed, the effects of what is portrayed in the media is crucial to how people view the world around them and behave in their daily lives. Brooks & Hébert (2006) fond that how an individual constructs their social identity "is shaped by commodified texts produced by media for audiences that are increasingly segmented by the social constructions of race and gender." Stated simply, media depictions are "central to what ultimately come to represent our social realities" (Brooks & Hébert, 2006). Although there is a cyclical effect with no obvious starting point, it is clear that what is portrayed in the media effects how people view the world and people around them, especially in terms of race and gender. The way people act and think daily, and their own individual biases influence what is chosen to be portrayed on television and the manner in which producers do so, thus continuing the cycle even further.

It has been suggested that interpersonal, explicit forms of racism, such as lynching, cross-burning, and racial assaults, is now frowned upon in society and has decreased in the past few decades (Wilson, 2017). However, this has resulted in an individual's biases and prejudices being manifested in subtle forms (Wilson, 2017). It is through these quiet, subtle forms of racism that have the power to "lessen the success of discriminated persons in this country" (Barringer, 2004). These subtle forms of racism are known as microaggressions, which are "those inadvertent and subtle messages that demean, insult, and invalidate a person" (Wilson, 2017). Microaggressions can be verbal or non-verbal and can

also be both intentional or unintentional; many individuals are unaware of their microaggressive tendencies, which is why these subtle forms of prejudice are so dangerous and still so pervasive. Regardless, they are a form of "systematic, everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place" (Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Their pervasiveness in daily life often leads to their dismissal by the microaggresor or accusation of hyper-sensitivity of the person on the receiving end.

The quietest form of racism, microaggressions still have "the damaging effects of even the loudest, most hatefully kind" (Barringer, 2004). In fact, the cumulative effects of microaggressions overtime foster inequality in society, impair interpersonal relationships, create emotional turmoil within an individual as well as lead to a decrease in both mental and physical health (Wilson, 2017). Additional detrimental effects of racial microaggressions include psychological stress, high blood pressure, depression, sleeping problems, substance abuse, eating disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Nadal as cited in Wilson, 2017). Additionally, when people of color try to call out people on their microaggressive behavior, they are often told to not be so oversensitive or petty, thus nullifying or diminishing their racial experience as being invalid (Due & Constantine, 2007). As a result, people of color develop their own coping skills to prevent microaggressions from happening or to be prepared to respond (Nadal et al., 2011).

Douglas Harper argued that making sociology visual was essentially making society visible, thus leading to a visual of social reality (as cited in Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Similarly, by making microaggressions visual, there is an opportunity to "recognize and understand how multiple forms of racism exist" (Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Thus, given the impact media and primetime television plays on social reality, the current study examines two primetime television shows, namely *Black-ish* and *Fresh Off the Boat*, to see how microaggressions are depicted and displayed. These shows specifically feature and revolve around people of color, thus making the characters more than just a stereotype. By making these minorities the main characters, there is depth to them; they become more than just a

check off a diversity checklist. These individuals are shown and depicted to be individuals. They become much more than their racial category. Additionally, by creating shows that revolve around the lives and perspectives of people of color, a different version of reality is depicted. Thus, by studying these specific shows, there will be an insight into how these minorities perceive and engage with the microaggressions of everyday life. There will also be insight into how microaggressions appear and are reacted to in the lives of these people of color.

Purpose Statement

The current study examines how minorities are portrayed in media featuring people of color in comparison to how they are portrayed in White television, which is aimed at a larger, broader audience. Specifically, I want to see the ways in which microaggressions are displayed and made visual, especially since these interactions are often written out of White primetime television. Additionally, I want to see how people of color react to these microaggressions and how their reactions are received.

Conceptual Framework

Kenya Barris, creator of *Black-ish*, said "*The Cosby Show* meant a lot to me as a kid, but that could have very easily been a white family. I wanted to do a show about what it was like to be a black family living in this environment" (Gomez, 2017). *Black-ish* depicts a Black family living the American dream and how the synthesis of the two concepts looks and is experienced; living the American dream as a White person in comparison to a Black person paints a very different picture. Since the show revolves around a Black family's journey and experience of the American dream, one would assume that viewers would also be Black since people enjoy watching characters who are similar to themselves (Ellithorpe & Bleakley, 2016). However, studies have shown that African-American casts boast large percentages of white viewers (Schneider, 2017). In fact, roughly 79% of the *Black-ish* audience is non-black (Schneider, 2017). These statistics seem intriguing since one would assume that a TV show about a

different culture would be most attractive to people of the culture. Bodenhausen et al. (1995) found that exposure of images of successful African Americans may have positive effects on racial attitudes of White individuals (as cited in Monnk-Turner et al., 2010). Netflix's show, *Insecure*, about a young African-American woman living in Los Angeles sees a similar trend, with over half of their audience being non-white. The creator, Prentice Penny was surprised by the results of their audience, but then said, "…you get mad that that should be fascinating, you know, because we're just telling stories about humans" (Schneider, 2017). This is the same reason why minorities can still relate to and be entertained by mainstream media, even though they don't look like any of the characters. If minority individuals can relate to White actors, White individuals should also find no issue being entertained or hearing the stories of people of color.

Fresh Off the Boat tells the story of Eddie Huang, whose family moves from Washington D.C. to the suburbs of Orlando, Florida, where the father is opening a cowboy-themed steakhouse. Creator of *Fresh Off the Boat,* Nahnatchka Khan, describes the importance of the perspective of the show saying, "it's told from the inside out, meaning the Huangs are always the ones who are telling the story, not the ones being looked at in a fish bowl and pointed at" (Jones, 2017). This is crucial being that even passive viewing "sustains uncritical acceptance of stereotypical portrayals such that advertising albeit unintentionally shapes the American public's view of minorities" (Bristor, Lee, & Hunt, 1994; Wikes & Valencia, 1989; Taylor & Stern, 2013). In examining all primetime television shows, it is important to note how microaggressions are depicted. If characters on a person's favorite television show can get away with microaggressive behaviors, people may think that these behaviors are acceptable in real life. Additionally, if characters do not react or retaliate, a person of color's experience may be diminished or attributed to being oversensitive since it is not depicted as a problem on screen.

Since its beginnings, media, especially television, has grown tremendously. As a result, more and more channels and shows have sprung up, in addition to streaming platforms, leading to audience

fragmentation. With so many shows and channels competing for attention, producers must be more specific in who they target in order to ensure that the show will succeed, thus making room for diverse programming portraying stories of diverse backgrounds (Lotz, 2015). With various programming, various perspectives can be shown. Through this multi-lens view, people can view social reality in a more wholistic way. For example, a white show might depict a microaggression and quickly dismiss it as a joke, whereas shows told by people of color may explicitly portray the impact these small, degrading, everyday comments have on an individual and how they experience life. These shows will also reveal the ways in which racism still persist today and how this can only be revealed by viewing social reality through a broader, more inclusive lens.

It's interesting to note how the creation of these shows all involve a sort of statement to the Hollywood industry: their stories should be told by people living these narratives. There is always a social justice issue involved with these media portrayals that focus specifically on people of color. Even if it was not intended, the creators and participants of these movies and shows must have a stance on the power of their diverse cast and the significance of the creation of their show. In comparison to the other shows, *How I Met Your Mother* was a result of 9/11. The authors had been talking about the idea of the show, but after the attacks on September 11th, they decided to start taking action due to the epiphany that life is short. One of the creators, Carter Bays, said "It really was a 'do it now or never do it' moment. Life is short—this is something we want to do eventually, we should do it" (Lee, 2016). Unlike the other shows, Carter Bays and Craig Thomas were able to create a show that revolved around the usual twists and turns that come with falling in love, and the various paths to doing this. There is no discussion of race or how their characters should be portrayed—that was never a consideration in the creation of show. Yet even for these other shows that revolve around navigating various aspects of life, race becomes prevalent almost immediately. *Black-ish* creator Kenya Barris said, "I will be so happy when diversity is not a word…I have the best job in the world and I'm constantly having to talk about

diversity… This is ridiculous. Everything is about black and white" (Nededog, 2016). Interestingly, Jon Chu, creator of the film *Crazy Rich Asians,* was suggested to turn the main character, Rachel Chu, into a White individual for better success. Whether or not they want their films to become a starter for conversations regarding diversity and representation, the current state of Hollywood does not allow for anything but that due to the lack of representation. However, these types of shows and films with minorities cast as main characters, allow minorities to tell their story the way they want it to be told. They can depict themselves as individuals and beyond their stereotypes.

Critical race theory involves a "critical race study of how race, racism, ad other forms of oppression emerge in the experiences of communities of color" (Huber & Solorzano, 2015). This investigation is guided by five major tenants of critical race theory, namely:

(a) centralizing race, racism, and multiple forms of intersecting oppressions experienced by people of color, (b) challenging dominant ideologies that justify the subordinate positions of people of color created by structural oppression, (c) centering and utilizing experiential knowledge as the foundation for research on communities of color, (d) utilizing an interdisciplinary perspective that draws across and within the boundaries of academic disciplines to answer research questions, and (e) encompassing an unapologetic stance for racial justice for communities of color. (Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Smith-Maddox & Solorzano, 2002; Solorzano, 1997)

Additionally, many discourse analysts define discourse as "ways of speaking about a topic from a particular point of view" in order to (re)articulate positions of power within a social power (Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Thus, a critical discourse analysis of the prevalence of microaggressions and how they are handled may help dismantle the norm thinking of white as "native", dominant group. By highlighting microaggressive interactions, the unseen is made visible.

Method

For the study, I plan on using a discourse analysis to see the discourse between the experience of microaggressions as depicted in programming angled through the lens of minorities, namely *Black-ish* and *Fresh Off the Boat*. Through watching the pilot episode of each show, I will note how the characters act in situations where microaggressions are present. Huber & Solorzano (2015) note that visual microaggressions act as multimodal texts to articulate "the relationship between everyday racist assaults and institutional structures of racism that mediate the public discourses about people of color that in turn, create and perpetuate these racist stereotypic images." The main discourse that is focused on is the racist nativist discourse that legitimizes whites as "native" group, thus subordinating, marginalizing, and excluding people of color (Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Pérez & Huber, 2011; Gee, 2011). The key in visual microaggression is how white supremacy and racism remains unseen (i.e. the quietest form of racism). For example, Barringer (2004) writes, "a racist today does not point to the color of skin, but we can see that the mind is fixed on that feature." Thus, making microaggression visible makes these acts of racism very explicit, legitimizing their existence and the experiences of people of color. By examining these shows based solely around a specific culture, I can investigate microaggressions made and experienced. Nadal et al. (2010) coined the term "cycle of microaggressions" in which some recipients of microaggressions also enact microaggressions. As a result of being a victim to microaggressions and other forms of oppression, they may not see the ways in which they enact monoracial privileges and biases (Nadal et al., 2011).

Analysis

Silent Reaction

Within both of the TV shows, microaggressions appeared as often as they would in real life. The quietest racism is met with a silent reaction, a private retaliation. One of the most common forms of this

quiet reaction is seen in the characters' gaze. In *Fresh Off the Boat*, the Huang family is originally from Chinatown in Washington DC. Often White tourists, shown through their floral shirts, fanny packs, and camera around their necks, will ask for directions to the White House, deliberately speaking slowly and over-pronunciating each word as if the children would not understand. As soon as a microaggression takes place, the camera pans to the recipient of the microaggression and a deliberate look towards the camera ensues from the character on the receiving end. Even if they are just witnessing a microaggression, there is also a deliberate gaze present. For example, when the Huang's first move to Orlando and Jessica introduces herself to the suburb moms, they reply with "oh I was expecting something a little more exotic" and "oh, your English is very good". The camera pans to the kids watching the interaction as they give another gaze towards the camera—a look of disapproval and confusion. The same thing is seen in *Black-ish*. A White coworker at Andre's office asked how he thought a Black guy would say "good morning." Before replying, Andre pauses and gives a big look to the side, another look of both disapproval and confusion, as if to say "did he really just say that?". Although the camera pans are intentional and the gaze to the camera is deliberate, there is some unsaid knowledge that viewers must be knowledgeable of in order to understand the importance of the characters' gaze. A person of color who had experienced a very similar situation would instantly recognize the gaze as a result of being in that situation or a similar one or simply being aware of the implications of what was said. If a viewer is unknowledgeable of the significance of the gaze, it might go over their head. There is a possibility for backfire if they incorrectly dismiss the microaggression due to the lack of reaction from the recipient.

Another form of silent reactions are private forms of retaliation. Since both shows feature minority families living in middle-class, predominantly white environments, there is a fair amount of assimilation that takes place in their everyday lives, which will be discussed further in the next section. As a result of the daily assimilation, the characters show their retaliation at home, in places where the

white people cannot hear them. For example, Jessica Huang says, "Evan is not going to school today; his fat friend JJ gave him cheese today and apparently he's lactose intolerant. His body is rejecting white culture, which makes me kind of proud." Eddie is embarrassed when he brings traditional Chinese meals for lunch to school and is ridiculed for the smell, thus leading him to protesting against bringing Chinese food to school even though he willingly and happily enjoys the Chinese food at home. Additionally, when Eddie is called a "chink" in the lunch room and punches the kid that called him that, the camera shows two very disappointed parents. However, to the viewers surprise, they are mad at the principle and at the school for not sticking up for their child. This is one of the clearest rejections of microaggressions shown, emphasizing how these small microaggressions are real and unacceptable. However, these microaggressions also work to make them stronger. For once, Eddie feels as if his parents are on his side. The move, although not an international immigration, makes them stronger; they learn how to assimilate and make a place for themselves in the environment where they are systematically made to feel less than. The true private retaliation is making a place for themselves where they are looked down upon and persisting through the obstacles that are constantly thrown their way.

Interestingly, the characters often show their own microaggressive tendencies, both towards White people and people of other races. For example, *Fresh Off the Boat* perpetrates the visual of Latinx individuals as laborers by featuring a Hispanic cook at the restaurant, oversized white tee, neck tattoo, and playing gangster music when he comes in the scene. In *Black-ish*, Andre wants to throw a real "African" birthday party for his son, so he includes as many African customs as possible, including African music and traditional outfits. It seems as if they are perpetrating the visual as blacks being from Africa until Andre's father points out that they're Black, not African. Additionally, Andre tries to dig deep into "urban" culture when he is promoted to Senior Vice President of the urban department, showing images of violence, gangs, and police sirens, the stereotypical image people think of when they think of

"urban" or Black culture. However, as the episode progresses, Andre learns how urban can also mean

hip, cool, and colorful, just like his family; a counternarrative is presented to contrast the stereotypical

narratives.

The Struggle

As mentioned, many typical stereotypes are addressed, even within the pilot episode of each

show. Yet a counternarrative is presented immediately after, an aspect rarely shown on predominantly

white TV shows, like *Meet the Goldbergs* or *How I Met Your Mother*. When a stereotype is presented,

characters are shown in a struggle between embracing the fact that the stereotype applies to them and

not wanting to be another stereotype. In *Black-ish*, Andre Junior's white friend Josh comes over and

raids through the fridge looking for grape soda. Andre senior tries to ask why Josh would assume they

would have grape soda but is immediately silenced when Josh finds some grape soda. Andre's

frustration with the situation demonstrates the struggle people face day to day when they find some

parts of themselves aligning with stereotypical views. However, these counternarratives help elaborate

on the characters' personal narratives, showing how they are much more than their race or stereotypes.

The struggle these characters face revolve around living in predominantly White communities.

Although only the pilot episode of each show was examined, there is a great struggle seen in characters

assimilating to their environment. When Eddie starts at his new school and the teacher begins

introducing him to his class, she starts struggling in pronouncing his Chinese name and Eddie

immediately jumps in and says, "you can call me Eddie" to which she replies, "oh thank God." This

demonstrates how people of color are ready to help ease the discomfort many white people experience

when they encounter a new culture. Rather than having them sit with their discomfort, people of color

are expected to make the situation easier for the white person, even though the reverse is rarely true. In

Black-ish, Andre junior starts going by "Andy" because it is edgy, yet approachable. Andre senior posits

the question that in an effort to make it, if black individuals dropped a little bit of their culture and the rest of the world picked it up, renaming it "urban". This is also true in *Fresh Off the Boat* with Eddie giving up his beloved Chinese lunches to eat Lunchables instead. These shows demonstrate how people of color often deal with and avoid microaggressions by easing the discomfort of White people; there are rarely ever instances where White individuals, especially in the media, go out of their way to accommodate people of color.

Another aspect of struggle that these characters of color face are instances of tokenism. For Andre, the company was severely lacking in diversity that when one person of color reached a promotion, it was a celebration for all the people of color in the office, as if they all made it. Andre was disappointed being promoted to Senior Vice President of specifically the urban department; he originally thought he wanted to be the first black SVP for the company, when he really wanted to be the first SVP that happened to be black. Although the difference seems minuscule, there are huge implications in the difference. Additionally, these characters feel as if they are constantly on a platform wherein they must prove a point. Andre emphasized that the job was more than just about money and a promotion; it was about breaking down barriers. In any white-dominant show, this second narrative would never be present. A promotion would simply be a promotion due to their work ethic and no deeper thought would be given to it.

Conclusion

By examining the pilot episodes of two shows revolved around and told by people of color, counternarratives to the white version of social realities are depicted. These shows portray the detrimental effects of microaggressions and how these comments and acts should not be dismissed as innocent or uninformed. People on the receiving end of microaggressions are embedded in a culture wherein white individuals are always accounted for and cannot handle discomfort. This leads to a lack of

reactions available when people encounter microaggressions. Rather than pursuing an awkward conversation about why someone's comment may have been problematic or hurtful, those that receive microaggressions turn to side glances and private retaliations instead. Rather than retaliating directly to the perpetrator, they take action at a later time when they feel more comfortable and possibly safer.

Although more explicit forms of racism are decreasing, microaggressions are shown to have effects just as detrimental. By visualizing these microaggressions and seeing how they affect lives of many people, more and more people will be compelled to think before they speak. Being able to see how common people of color encounter microaggressions and how they lack plausible responses, people will start to see that microaggressions are as unnecessary and hurtful as explicit forms of racism; they'll see how microaggressions themselves manifest their own personal biases and prejudices. Focusing on recognizing the gaze and the uncomfortableness of people on the receiving end of microaggressions can shed light on recognizing that something hurtful has been said or that someone might need support. Visualizing microaggressions provides a space for learning and educating those producing microaggressions; they will see how their words cannot simply be brushed over and how their words have societal implications, whether intended by the sender or not. By visualizing microaggressions, we visualize the problems of race and racism still present in society today. Being able to visualize and recognize the societal issues in the world around us is the first step to changing things to how we want them to be.

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