



14 Positive Stereotypes and Counter-Stereotypes: Examining Their Effects on Prejudice Reduction and Favorable Intergroup Relations

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Amidst all the negative stereotypes rightly advanced in the preceding chapters of this book, a look at the positive seems an important and necessary coda to encompass the full picture of media stereotyping as we enter the 2020s. As we navigate a global COVID-19 pandemic, outbreak inequalities, discrimination and stigma (based on various identities such as race, social class, nationality, citizenship, and age) continue to be important to examine and challenge. Yet, we also see new ways of coalition-building, solidarities, and positive intergroup relations during crises. Words, images, media, and communication remain powerful tools for healing and transformation at the individual and societal levels.

A fascinating and important area of research within media stereotyping relates to positive stereotypes, counter-stereotypes, and prejudice reduction. Often when we think of the word “stereotype,” we imagine negative words such as “criminal,” “violent,” “loud,” “lazy,” “threatening,” and so on. However, stereotypes are not positive or negative by definition; rather, they simply are cognitive schemas or representations of groups of people that we hold either individually or collectively within a culture. Some examples of positive stereotypes are when groups of people are generalized as intelligent,

athletic, polite, hardworking, or sexy. The bulk of the literature on stereotyping, including media stereotyping, has focused mainly on negative stereotypes and hostile forms of prejudice. It is only more recently, especially in the last two decades or so, that media psychologists have started paying more attention to positive stereotyping effects, counter-stereotypes, subtle forms of prejudice such as paternalism and envy, and focusing on prejudice reduction strategies (Ramasubramanian, 2007, 2010, 2015; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007). This chapter will explain the difference between negative and positive stereotypes, counter-stereotypes and prosocial effects, and strategies for prejudice reduction such as media literacy training and ways to work on changing media misrepresentations and improving intergroup relations.

Although the terms “positive stereotypes” and “counter-stereotypes” may sound similar, they refer to two different concepts. Counter-stereotypes are ideas about a group that challenge or counter widely held cultural beliefs and mental models of a group. For example, *The Cosby Show*, an American sitcom featuring an African American upper-middle class family, is a counter-stereotypical representation of an African American family because it is inconsistent with the widely held beliefs that African Americans cannot be members of the upper-middle class at that time. Positive stereotypes, though, are not the same as counter-stereotypes. They can be understood as broad generalizations about groups by associating positive characteristics, traits, and beliefs with members of a group. Some examples of positive stereotypes that are common within the U.S. mainstream culture are notions such as women are more nurturing caregivers than men, African Americans are more athletic than other racial groups, gay men are more stylish than straight men, Asian Americans are more hardworking as “model minorities” compared to other racial/ethnic minorities, and disabled people are inspiring merely on the basis of their disabilities. While these positive traits and characteristics may seem complimentary, they are still stereotypes, since they are abstractions about entire groups of people, which may or may not apply to individuals. Just as with negative stereotypes, positive stereotypes can also affect expectations, emotions, behaviors, and outcomes at the individual and interpersonal levels. They can also influence interpersonal, institutional and societal outcomes.

Throughout this chapter, we use the words “positive” and “negative” cautiously. Media stigmatization of groups is a dynamic function of changing media contexts, evolving intergroup relations, and ever-dynamic social-political factors. With changing political and social contexts, the same groups that were once deemed positive could be seen at a later point in time as negative, or vice-versa. Cultural stereotypes about groups are also dynamic and change constantly over time and across cultures. For instance, the term “nerd” used to

be derogatory a few decades ago but now there is a notion of “nerding out,” which is typically unpacked positively, showing that one has passion about something. Similarly, words such as “queer,” which was seen as derogatory and offensive in previous generations, is now embraced by LGBTQ+ communities as a positive and inclusive term. A group evaluated as positive in one cultural context might be evaluated as negative in another cultural context. Depending on the sociocultural political climate, stereotypes could also change from negative to positive or vice-versa under one political party, for instance, as compared to another. They are also dynamic in the sense that perceptions of one group influence those of another group. For example, terms such as “positive” and “negative” can sometimes be used by dominant groups to create a false dichotomy between “good” and “bad” minorities. For instance, positive stereotypes such as model minority stereotypes towards Asian Americans have been shown to be used as a way of creating racial hierarchies that reinforce anti-Blackness by pitting them against African Americans and Latino/a/x Americans as a way of justifying social hierarchies (Bonilla-Silva, 2004).

Typically, prejudice too, like stereotypes, has been associated largely with negative feelings such as dislike, discomfort, anger, hate, and fear (Stangor, 2000). However, in this chapter, we will focus on more subtle forms of prejudice such as benevolence, paternalism, envy, and pity. For our purposes, prejudice is about faulty judgments based on insufficient knowledge and often involves some kind of negative evaluation of the group. For instance, research by Glick and Fiske (1996) shows that when women are portrayed using positive stereotypes of being nurturing caregivers, patronizing feelings of benevolence are expressed towards them. Ramasubramanian and Oliver (2007) have also shown that news stories about Asian Indians can activate benevolent prejudice among readers, which are expressed as sympathy and pity. As we will elaborate later in this chapter, positive stereotypes can lead, ironically, at times to *more* prejudice and discrimination.

Towards the end of this chapter, we will examine some research-based theory-driven strategies such as counter-stereotypes, media literacy education, and intergroup dialogues for reducing prejudice and discrimination, especially towards groups that have been historically marginalized in various cultural settings, including within media industries, ownership, and representation. As media users, scholars, educators, artists, content creators, and community members, we could all help in small ways to work toward dismantling social inequalities, reducing hate, and removing injustices in the world around us. We discuss directions for theory and practice, including the need to support alternative, community-based media spaces that could serve as safe spaces for minoritized groups to be heard more fully and to flourish in society.

Historical Representations of Positive Stereotypes and Counter-Stereotypes in the Media

Stereotypes in media typically reflect those disseminated through society: the conventional, formulaic, and oversimplified conceptions, opinions, or beliefs (Means Coleman, 1998) become a part of a script, a storyline, and a character's development. Media narratives play a crucial role inside of identity-making processes and the identity negotiation of stigmatized groups, including the perceptions of self, one's ingroups, and other outgroups. Moreover, stereotypes typically originate from a dominant, hegemonic, elitist, patriarchal, top-down view of minoritized and marginalized groups rather than from those who are othered. Historically, given that media industries and corporations were owned and operated by social elites, mainstream media reflected dominant cultural discourses and values. From radio shows like *Sam 'N' Henry* (1926–1928), later titled the popular, *Amos 'N' Andy* (Ely, 1991), to the silent motion picture, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), since the early 1900s, audiences have been exposed to examples of stereotypical portrayals in the media, even racial invisibility. Media producers realized the financial benefit of producing content that could be re-produced easily. This led to the production of stereotypical content based on race, gender, sex, and class in different genres and platforms.

Stigmatized groups pay careful attention to how their groups are represented in mainstream media as it works as a source of information about their status and positionality in society (Fujioka, 2005). There are also examples throughout history of stigmatized groups challenging mainstream stereotypes as well as using avenues such as community media, alternative media, and ethnic media to resist and protest cultural stereotypes of their groups (Ramasubramanian, 2016, 2019). However, social groups such as the poor, prisoners, and indigenous groups such as Native Americans in the U.S., Aboriginal people in Australia, Maori in New Zealand, Romani people in Europe, and adivasis in the Indian subcontinent, continue to be excluded even from so-called alternative media. Such groups are termed “subaltern” populations, without much visibility. Not surprisingly, against such a backdrop of invisibility for certain stigmatized groups, the “first-ever” phenomenon is typically a much celebrated moment in the history of media portrayals of groups since it marks the first time these groups find themselves represented in the media.

Shows such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957), which presented miscegenation between a White woman and Cuban man, became extremely popular, arguably the most popular sitcom to date. Miscegenation, or interracial marriage, was

illegal in some U.S. states until 1967, making the program one of the first of its kind. Not only in terms of race relations, but also because it continued to challenge gender stereotypes against the backdrop of the standard image of White, heterosexual couples within the American Dream mythology. It attempted to counter the nuclear family presented in other programming during the time, shows like *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963), *Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–1971), *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960), *Little House on the Prairie* (1974–1983), *The Honeymooners* (1955–1956), *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–1970) and *Bewitched* (1964–1972). The image of women and Black America were the first to be stereotyped and the first to introduce counter and positive stereotypes after several decades of one dimensional television and film representations. Years of White actors portraying people of color by applying darker makeup, adopting accents, and appropriating culture, as well as persons without disabilities portraying those with different abilities, were followed by the continuation of stereotypical material and gains in representations into the new millennium.

Such “first-ever” shows, films, ads, or magazine covers are not without criticism. Historically, television shows such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957), *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992), *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986–2011), or *The Ellen Degeneres Show* (2003–Present) were all significant in terms of increasingly positive portrayals of typically marginalized groups, but often ended up focusing on a token positive role model who often had to work within the limitations of the imagination of the dominant audience members for these shows. Programs from the 1960s to early 2000s like *Facts of Life* (1979–1988), *Different Strokes* (1978–1986), *Designing Women* (1986–1993), *The Power Rangers* (1993–1996), *Clueless* (1995), *Saved by the Bell* (1989), *Blossom* (1990–1995), *Dawson’s Creek* (1998–2003), *Seinfeld* (1989–1998), *Full House* (1987–1995), *Friends* (1994–2004), *The Office* (2005–2013), and *Boy Meets World* (1993–2000) were widely popular, but only had one or two people of color in the main cast. Later, programs would feature one character from the LGBT community, followed by people with disabilities. Most characters from marginalized groups were added to mainstream media content as an afterthought or as token characters.

In terms of representations of people with mental health issues, some prominent representations occurred in popular films like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), *Good Will Hunting* (1997), and *Girl Interrupted* (1999). *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) is a true story about John Forbes Nash, Jr., a Nobel Prize-winning mathematician who lived with schizophrenia. *The Soloist* (2009) tells the story of Nathaniel Ayers, a musician who deals with schizophrenia while homeless in Los Angeles. Although these media entertainment programs feature people with disabilities prominently, seemingly

positive portrayals often erase the painful past of groups by “making it seem like it wasn’t that bad” and this often had negative impacts on the audiences (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). Another example of this phenomenon is seen in the Disney movie, *Pocahontas* (1995). While some might argue it was visibility for Native Americans, critics see the film as erasure, a retelling, and a missed opportunity for a group’s truth. Similarly, Jhally and Lewis (1992) point out that programs such as *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992) might appear to be progressive with its presentation of the Black upper-middle class family. However, their study revealed mixed reviews and reception as the presentation of success failed to capture the systemic oppressions Blacks encounter.

Contemporary Representations of Positive/Counter-Stereotypes in the Media

Cultural stereotypes, including those within media spaces, are not static entities but they do fluctuate both gradually and abruptly over time. For instance, socio-political climate and current affairs play a role in shaping how a group’s perceptions and cultural stereotypes (both positive and negative) could change. An incident such as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the U.S. brought fairly invisible groups such as Muslims, Sikhs, and South Asians in the spotlight of U.S. mainstream media and also saw increased hate crimes against these groups (Arora, 2013; Stomer, 2005).

Intersectionality, when taken up together with media examples to better understand identity, complicates and deepens the conversations surrounding stereotypes. For example, religion when taken with race can act as a buffer or modifying variable to explain positive and counter-stereotypes that different racial groups experience. In research by Hayward and Krause (2015), religious identity, affiliations, support and media consumption impact even how African American individuals cope with racial discrimination and their determination to cope with stereotyping. Additionally, if one finds their racial and religious group to be congruent with a media text, they will likely work to match the media representation. On the other hand, as seen in Hayward and Krause, if there is dissonance in the media image and the individual, one may assume self-blame along with other negative coping outcomes.

Another more positive example could be the legalization of gay marriage by the U.S Supreme Court, a major policy accomplishment for marriage equality activists, which could lead to more positive media coverage and publicity for this group. In other words, groups that are invisible otherwise might become more visible in a fairly short period of time. Similarly, their portrayals could also move from negative to positive and vice-versa. The trajectory of

media portrayals for each group, therefore, could vary considerably across time and cultures; continuums from invisibility, to negative, to positive portrayals are misnomers.

While many stigmatized groups are often fighting even just for visibility in the media, their representations tend to be uneven, mixed, and contradictory at times, even when they are portrayed in the media. For instance, media representations of Asian Americans range from derisive yellow peril and unassimilated perpetual foreigner to seemingly positive portrayals such as hardworking model minorities or as exotic and subservient (Ono & Pham, 2009; Paek & Shah, 2003; Zhang, 2010). In particular, research shows that contemporary media portrayals focus on the model minority stereotype of this group as being intelligent, polite, and nerdy (Chou & Feagin, 2008; Deo, Lee, Chin, Milman, & Wang Yuen, 2008; Kawaii, 2005). These representations also fail to note that Asian Americans vary vastly in terms of ethnic heritage, cultural values, achievements, education, and income levels in the U.S.

Counter-stereotypes and counter stories offer audiences an opposing narrative contrary to the historical ones they have often consumed through various media texts that position marginalized groups at the margins of society (Delgado, 1989). Counter-storytelling allows for marginalized groups, in particular, to be centered in the narrative presented about their respective group. Counter-stereotypes are not without the recognition of the existence of archaic and contemporary stereotypes. However, they complicate the narrative by allowing for oppositional reading, understanding, perceptions, and points of views. On the other hand, positive stereotypes, though they seem harmless, may affect audience members in negative ways.

An example of counter-narratives appears in shows such as ABC's *Grand Hotel* (2019), where Latino/a/x characters star in the show and are depicted as the owners of a luxury hotel instead of the subservient positions, a typical archetype on primetime television. CW's *Jane the Virgin* (2014–2019), a modern day telenovela, also presents an intersectional look into modern day Latin-American families inside of a hotel management and complicates ideas of motherhood, marriage, education, immigration, unplanned pregnancy, queer relationships, breast cancer, and success (Rose, 2019). These two shows followed ABC's *Ugly Betty* (2006–2010) with America Ferrera and they all present Latin-American communities without the inferiority or hypersexualization tropes. Indeed, the 2010s presented the newest media portrayals and made visible once invisible and denigrated groups of people.

Moving into the 2010s, audiences found racial groups were not the only ones receiving counter narratives in the media, particularly, entertainment media. In line with racial recognition, LGBTQ groups were becoming

increasingly more visible in television and film contexts. After Ellen Degeneres used the platform of her own show, *Ellen* (1994–1998), to announce to a live audience that she was gay in 1997, many other programs began to cast and star gay and lesbian characters. MTV's *The Real World* (1992–Present), CBS's *Survivor* (2000–Present), CBS's *Big Brother* (2000–Present) were some of the first to lead the way in the reality television genre. In recent years, fictional depictions are also increasing their queer and transgender media representations: *The L Word* (2004–2009), *Orange is the New Black* (2013–2019), *How to Get Away With Murder* (2014–2020), *Grey's Anatomy* (2004–present), *Black Lightning* (2018–2019), *She's Gotta Have It* (2017–2018), *Master of None* (2015–2017), along with many others on cable networks and streaming services have featured or starred characters that were lesbian, bisexual, queer or transgender. Many more “firsts” in films and television would soon follow the popular culture trend of presenting more inclusive representations. *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Moonlight* (2017) and FX's *Pose* (2018–present) gave audiences a deeper look into the lives of gay and transgender men, combating the one-dimensional view of the community. Recently, audiences were privy to shows like Freeform's (formerly ABC Family), *The Fosters* (2013–2018), where more realistic portrayals of modern, multi-talented women working together to support their family of teens were portrayed. With many current programs that center on the inner workings of diverse characters, audiences can choose shows that reflect their nuanced and complex lifestyles more wholly, absent of stereotypes. Even more films are being released that counter the stereotypical tale of identity groups. Recent box office films like *Black Panther* (2018) and *Wonder Woman* (2017) provide audiences with an opportunity to engage with superhero narratives in more culturally-inclusive ways, breaking away from the White male savior trope.

Beyond films, other animated television programs like *South Park* (1997–Present), *The Boondocks* (2005–2014), *Family Guy* (1999–Present), *The Cleveland Show* (2009–2013) use a much more raw, in-your-face, adult comedy version of stereotypes that made the audience aware of their existence. In 2016, Disney Pixar released *Zootopia*, personifying animals to teach its audiences about race and rage. Other animated movies like *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Finding Dory* (2016) displayed for children the abilities of those with mental illnesses and other abilities. King, Lugo-Lugo, Bloodworth-Lugo (2010) argued that positive stereotypes in animated films are still stereotypes which present distorted and dehumanizing renderings where values are still at the heart resting within dominant frames, often depicting delusions about difference after racism and sexism (pp. 158–159).

The landscape of primetime television in the last thirty years may appear to be changing with the increase of diverse programming, but some stereotypical images persist (Sink & Mastro, 2016; Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015). From race, gender, sex, sexuality, age, political affiliation, and class, there are progressive storytellers and content creators who are committed to more authentic, speculative and creative portrayals. They resist the archetypes and tropes of the past by embracing their own and others' stories that focus on the complexity of characterization, removed from underdeveloped caricatures, and toward the authentic. Because audiences are searching for the authentic in the representation that they see on the screen (Gray, 1995), it forces producers to "come correct." The list of recent and presently running television shows presenting counter-stereotypes through diverse representation in storytelling includes but is not limited to: ABC's *Black-ish* (2014–present; Black identities), ABC's *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015–present; Asian identities); ABC's *Mix-ish* (2019–Present; mixed racial identities), CW's *Jane the Virgin* (2014–2019; Latinx and religious identities); FX's *Pose* (2018; race and gender identities), ABC's *Good Doctor* (2017–present; neurodiversity), ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–present; race, religion, sex, gender, and immigrant identities), Netflix's *Atypical* (2017–present; neurodiversity), Netflix's *Grace and Frankie* (2015–present; age), NBC's *The Cool Kids* (2018–2019; age), CBS's *The Neighborhood* (2018–present; intercultural relations), Netflix's *Dear White People* (2017–present; race, sexuality, education, class), HBO's *Insecure* (2016–present; race and dating) and *Euphoria* (2019–present; age and drug use), *Freeform's Grown-ish* (2018–present; age, class, and education), and VH1's *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–present; race, gender and sexuality). Yet, we note that shows like ABC's *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015–present) present the model minority stereotypes of Asian culture, and Lifetime's *Devious Maids* (2013–2016) depicted the sexualized, subservient trope of Latin women on primetime television along with their nuanced storytelling. Outside of cable television, the use of premium channels and streaming services such as Netflix, HBO, Hulu, Showtime, and Starz have become a platform for counter stories.

Additionally, many media users today learn about contemporary cultural stereotypes (and counter-stereotypes) from sources such as late night television shows, social media, and celebrity news (Arcy & Johnson, 2018; Bennett, 2014; Ramasubramanian, 2015). Contemporary Asian American stand-up comedians such as Hasan Minhaj and Margaret Cho, for instance, have a huge following and are using humor as a way to bring greater attention to socio-political issues affecting their communities through programs such as Minhaj's Netflix show, *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* (2018–present). Social media and new media sources like Twitter and Facebook open up new opportunities

for user-generated content that can be more focused and help gain greater visibility for minoritized groups through such means as hashtag activism and visual digital storytelling opportunities such as #UnfairandLovely #WhyIStayed, and #BlackLivesMatter that could help reject mainstream stereotypes by countering its normalcy by drawing attention to important issues such as colorism, domestic violence, police brutality and the like. Given the possibilities of customization, personalization, and niche marketing within many contemporary media types, it is possible to tailor representations to niche audiences, which changes traditional notions of what would be considered mainstream, broadcasting, and a viable program. This is not to say that social media or other newer media technologies are the only media formats to use for media activism or that mere customization makes programming successful or that these forms of media do not contribute to negative stereotypes, misrepresentations, and hateful rhetoric towards marginalized communities. Yet the changing media technology and digital media environment has implications for the spaces where positive and counter-stereotypical storytelling can be expressed or constrained, as the case may be in various contexts.

Unraveling the Negative Effects of Positive Media Stereotypes

Although positive stereotypes may sound complimentary, they often have harmful effects on the stereotyped individual. For example, research suggests that model minority portrayals of Asian Americans might appear to be positive, but they actually reflect increased anti-Asian sentiments, reinforce racial hierarchies and lead to lack of policy support for minority groups (Chou & Feagin, 2008; Kawaii, 2005; Ramasubramanian, 2011). Research shows that Asian Americans are less likely to be considered for top administrative leadership positions and are often ostracized from organizational social networks (Paek & Shah, 2003; Suzuki, 2002). Ramasubramanian (2011) has found empirical support that heavy television viewers internalize positive Asian American television stereotypes, which increases anti-Asian sentiments, symbolic racist attitudes towards Asian Americans, and attributing their failures to internal causes such as lack of social skills.

Models such as the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 2001) from social psychology are significant because they throw light on less studied aspects of prejudice such as benevolent prejudice and envious prejudice, which are explained below, and they are especially relevant to unraveling the complex effects of positive stereotypes. It helps us understand that beyond feelings of pride and admiration expressed toward ingroups and close allies (for example,

middle class straight Christians in the U.S.) and downright hostile prejudice such as contempt and hate expressed towards groups evaluated as low on both warmth and competence (such as poor people or Muslims or undocumented immigrants in the U.S.), there are mixed and subtle aspects of prejudice elicited towards other groups. Benevolent prejudice, which includes feelings of pity and sympathy, is expressed toward groups judged as high in warmth but low in competence (such as the elderly, young children, or the disabled). Meanwhile, envious prejudice involves feelings such as envy and jealousy toward groups perceived to be high in competence but low in warmth (such as Asian Americans or Jewish people in the U.S.). Research shows that the portrayals of one minority group can influence the feelings of other minoritized groups along similar dimensions. For instance, Ramasubramanian and Oliver (2007) found that feelings of pity and sympathy are manifestations of benevolent prejudice towards Asian-Indians. They call this phenomenon “comparative media stereotyping,” such that reading positive news stories about Asian Indians as model minorities leads to hostile prejudice toward other racial minorities by White audiences.

Another important effect of positive stereotypes are “dovetailing effects” with negative stereotypes. That is, researchers have found that positive stereotypes are often accompanied by underlying subtle negative expectations. Researchers have found that priming positive stereotypes may lead to stereotype threat and negatively affect an individual’s performance on a stereotype-related task (Kahalon, Shnabel, & Becker, 2018). They found that women primed with stereotypes about motherhood performed worse on math tests than women who were not primed. These results illustrate the dovetailing effect of the positive stereotype of women’s ability to nurture others; it is accompanied by a negative expectation that women have lesser academic ability. Although some may believe that positive stereotypes are harmless, these results indicate that positive stereotypes result in the validation of complementary negative stereotypes (i.e., if women are good at childcare, they are not good at math).

Positive stereotypes are especially damaging because they often come with high expectations, unlike negative stereotypes. Research has shown that most people endorse the positive stereotype that Black people are good at athletics (Devine & Elliot, 1995). These endorsements can lead to performance expectations. When we meet someone who does not fit the stereotype, we are often shocked or confused. These expectancies can lead to damaging effects. Researchers have found that the positive stereotype of Black athleticism can affect career advice and ultimately career decisions (Czopp, 2010). In the study, participants assumed the role of a high school guidance counselor and

were given the folders for three students. Their task was to review the files and recommend that the student focus on one area (i.e. sports, business, theatre, schoolwork, etc.) in order to maximize their success. They found that male participants were more likely to recommend that a low academic-achieving Black student focus on sports more than a low academic-achieving White student. Another effect of performance expectations that originate from stereotypes is that marginalized groups can also internalize media messages—both positive and negative. Positive media stereotypes that are internalized as reality by members of a group can also lead to negative effects on them. For instance, Asian Americans have been documented to have increasingly higher rates of mental health and suicide (Kuroki, 2018), in part because they feel that they cannot live up to the expectations of the model minority and are less likely to seek or receive help for such health conditions (Morrison & Downey, 2000; Noh, 2018). Noh found that the model minority stereotype affects Asian women in three unique ways. Firstly, the expectation of success generates stress for the women. Secondly, the expectation of success causes women to blame themselves if they are not able to live up to the expectation. Lastly, the expectation of success partially explains why they are less likely to be provided health resources.

Counter-stereotypical portrayals in the media often include token authority figures holding prestigious positions of power such as political leaders, superstar athletes, judges, and so on. Sometimes there are token representations of characters and media personalities from marginalized groups just to “check the diversity box.” Social psychologists have studied the effects of such token counter-stereotypes to find that audience members might continue to hold negative stereotypes about the groups if the positive admirable media character from a marginalized group is seen as atypical (Barden, Maddux, Petty, & Brewer, 2004; Bodenhausen, Schwarz, Bless, & Wänke, 1995; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Ramasubramanian and Martinez (2017) show how media framing of President Obama as the first Black President of the U.S. could lead to reinforcing symbolic racism when framed in a negative light as not living up to expectations.

Token positive celebrities in the media continue to be judged and assessed using majority groups' dominant values, often having to assimilate into them to be taken seriously. For instance, Black actors are often expected to assimilate to Whiteness through their language, attire, hairstyle, and so on, in order to fit into White institutions and spaces. Communication accommodation perspectives (Coover, 2001) have been used to understand how only those counter-stereotypical exemplars that fit in with mainstream values (such as older adults who appear to be youthful, Blacks who assimilate to Whiteness, or

queer folks who exhibit heterosexual normative behaviors) are seen as “acceptable” by dominant groups. In such cases, the original mental model about the marginalized groups remains intact because the token representations are not pushing the needle enough in terms of disrupting existing stereotypes.

Research continues to show that positive stereotypes place the stereotyped individual between a rock and a hard place. Researchers have found that racial minorities who choose to speak up when confronted with a positive stereotype are evaluated by others as less favorable when compared to those who confront a negative stereotype or do not confront at all (Alt, Chaney, & Shih, 2019). They found that the perceived offensiveness of the racist remark and perceived evaluations partially mediate the relationship between stereotype expression and intention to confront the perpetrator about positive stereotypes. This case shows that many minorities may choose to bite their tongue when it comes to positive stereotypes, not because they have nothing to say, but because they are aware that they are putting their relationships, reputation, or more on the line if they do speak up.

Moving Towards Counter-Stereotypes, Prejudice Reduction, and Positive Intergroup Relations: Future Directions

An important development within this area of research has been a move towards more practical solutions and action-oriented research that can provide insights on what can be done at the individual, intergroup, and community level in terms of countering, combating, and reducing the harmful effects of both positive and negative stereotypes (Ramasubramanian, 2016, 2019). Media scholars have more recently started examining the role of counter-stereotypes and counter-narratives as ways of challenging mainstream media stereotypes (Ramasubramanian, 2007, 2010, 2015). Here, the word “counter-stereotype” refers to media portrayals and representations that counter, resist, or challenge existing cultural stereotypes.

Although positive stereotypes in the media can cause damage when they are used to categorize others, counter-stereotypical representations in the media can also help minoritized individuals develop a sense of social identity. For instance, if the prevalent cultural stereotype of Black-Americans is that they are violent and criminal, then the counter-stereotype would be portrayals that depict them as law-abiding and peace-loving. Or if a group such as the elderly are portrayed as frail and dependent, a counter-stereotype would be to present them as independent and strong. For instance, researchers found that media representations of gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) individuals serve as role models and sources of inspiration for GLB viewers (Gomillion & Giuliano,

2011). The participants cited the following as influential to their self-realization, decision to come out, or feeling about their GLB identity: books, websites, *Ellen DeGeneres*, *Will and Grace*, *The L Word*, and *Queer as Folk*.

Studies reveal that exposure to counter-stereotypical in comparison to stereotypical media exemplars have a positive effect on reducing stereotypical attitudes of majority groups, as well (Bodenhausen et al., 1995; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Power, Murphy, & Coover, 1996; Ramasubramanian, 2007, 2011; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007). For instance, experimental research shows that exposure to admirable media celebrities from marginalized groups can lead to prejudice reduction among majority group members (Ramasubramanian, 2015), thus making a case for more auspicious portrayals of stigmatized groups through such portrayals. Over the long term, it is also possible to form parasocial relationships with characters from outgroups who are admired and likable (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Ortiz and Harwood (2007) have further theorized that mediated parasocial contact is especially likely to happen if characters from dominant groups model prosocial behaviors in intergroup portrayals in media stories.

Another possible benefit of counter-stereotypes to the target is “stereotype boost.” Stereotype boost is an improvement in performance that is elicited by positive stereotypes. Researchers have found that priming Asian identity improved math performance (Shih, Wout, & Hambarchyan, 2015). But, they also found that the method of priming stereotypes is incredibly important in this process. The participants that were primed implicitly performed better than participants primed explicitly. These results suggest that positive stereotypes can cause stereotype boost or stereotype threat, depending on the way in which the subjects are primed. Researchers found that priming White identity for biracial Black-White individuals caused a boost in verbal reasoning performance (Gaither, Remedios, Schultz, & Sommers, 2015). These results suggest that multiracial people may be able to manage their complex identities in ways that may counteract the many forms in which multiracial individuals experience double jeopardy.

Another approach towards prejudice reduction has been called “cognitive retraining,” and it consists of repeated exposure to counter-stereotypes, reducing stereotype activation, which is consistent with social learning and social cognitive theory perspectives from communication (Burns, Monteith, & Parker, 2017). Research has found that even brief exposure to media featuring counter-stereotypical depictions of outgroup characters can change racial attitudes (Bodenhausen et al., 1995; Ramasubramanian, 2011). Research has found a pervasive tendency for people to see members of outgroups as more similar to each other than ingroup members are to each other (i.e., “they all

look the same” or “all of them act the same”). This tendency is called the outgroup homogeneity effect (Mullen & Hu, 1989). One reason that cognitive retraining or other counter-stereotypic interventions may be effective is that they increase the perceived variability of the outgroup by highlighting the members of the outgroup who do not fit into traditional stereotypes. Researchers have found that increasing an individual’s perception of the variability of the outgroup members reduces prejudice and discrimination (Er-rafiy & Brauer, 2013). Researchers have begun to test the effectiveness of self-generated counter-stereotype interventions and have found that they reduce heuristic thinking and decrease the dehumanization of outgroup members (Prati, Vasiljevic, Crisp, & Rubini, 2015).

Less formal interventions can be used in everyday life to work towards reducing the prevalence of positive stereotypes. For example, if a person does not use positive stereotypes, they can still work to reduce the prevalence of these stereotypes by speaking up when they are a bystander. Since research has shown that the targets of positive stereotypes choose not to speak up to avoid jeopardizing their relationship (Alt et al., 2019), it is important for bystanders to voice their feelings and concerns. By speaking up, they are taking the weight off their shoulders by removing the potential cost (lost friendship) to the target. Positive stereotypes are common because most people do not understand the harmful effects that they have. To reduce their prevalence, it is important for people to continue to educate themselves on the effects of positive stereotyping and share what they have learned with others.

In terms of media-based strategies to reduce intergroup prejudice, research by Ramasubramanian (2007) and Ramasubramanian and Oliver (2007) show that a combination of message-based strategies and audience-centered approaches could potentially work together to counter prejudice. That is, when media users are provided with training such as media literacy training, as well as exposed to counter-stereotypical exemplars in the media, the combined effects could work together to create beneficial effects on intergroup attitudes. Therefore, in terms of practical implications, media literacy education continues to be important for diversity education. Along with it, there is a need for mainstream media to actively promote more auspicious and counter-stereotypical stories, characters, and content to help negate the effects of existing stereotypes, both positive and negative. Additionally, research also shows that exposure to mainstream media is much more likely to lead to lower self-esteem and negative self-concept among ethnic minorities as compared to exposure to ethnic media (Ramasubramanian, Doshi, & Saleem, 2017). Therefore, supporting meaningful media produced by smaller, localized ethnic media, be it initiatives such as *Latinitas* magazine for Latina girls (Sousa

& Ramasubramanian, 2017) or projects such as Question Bridge and East Los High (Ramasubramanian, 2016) that are community-driven and explicitly focused on critical media literacy education, digital storytelling, and anti-prejudice narratives, is another way forward.

Conclusion

At every corner of media portrayals, there are opportunities for positive and counter-stereotypes to be present, though those are not without their negative consequences on members of the different marginalized groups. Counter-narratives and counter-storytelling in social media content also do not work in a vacuum. The effects of such media activism also impact the individual and their willingness to fight back. While counter-frames are designed to fight back and used as a means to survive everyday oppression felt by American society, they continue to be difficult and challenging. Practices such as online misogyny, doxxing, and other toxic environments continue to marginalize and silence minority groups. The lack of funding support and research attention for community-oriented initiatives and small media initiatives that are oriented towards social good are also significant challenges and barriers to overcome. Therefore, as media scholars, educators, and activists committed to social justice and using media for social good, it is important to not just do theoretically excellent and methodologically sound research studies in lab-based settings, but to take such research into the real-life to engage directly with media producers, policymakers, parents, and educators. Nonprofit media initiatives such as GLAAD, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, Media Rise, Silk Road Rising, and Honor the Treaties are all important to support in terms of broader public engagement, collaboration, and partnerships among academe, media industry, nonprofits, and policymakers.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank undergraduate Texas A&M student, Ms. Olivia Osteen, for her excellent feedback and assistance with proof-reading.

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