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## The Impact of Factual Versus Fictional Media Portrayals on Cultural Stereotypes

By SHEILA T. MURPHY

**ABSTRACT:** The present article explores how factual and fictional media portrayals may activate culturally shared racial and gender stereotypes and influence subsequent judgments involving members of stereotyped groups. In line with previous research (Power, Murphy, and Coover 1996), new data are presented that demonstrate that exposure to a stereotypic or counterstereotypic portrayal primes consistent interpretations of unrelated events (such as the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas hearings, the William Kennedy Smith–Patricia Bowman rape accusations, and spousal abuse). Both cognitive and motivational factors such as ingroup-outgroup bias appear to influence the relative weight given factual as opposed to fictional portrayals. For instance, men were equally harsh in the wake of a stereotypic female portrayal regardless of whether they believed it to be factual or fictitious. Moreover, men tended to discount a fictitious counterstereotypic portrayal of a female, whereas women were more likely to dismiss a fictitious stereotypic portrayal. Recommendations are offered suggesting how media portrayals might successfully reduce prejudice.

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**D**URING the O. J. Simpson criminal trial, there was tremendous concern regarding the media's ability to influence the jurors and their subsequent deliberations. In an attempt to shield jurors from an onslaught of information, speculation, and innuendo, they were sequestered and their exposure to the mass media was censored. Each day, newspaper articles that made reference to either the trial itself or to any of its cast of characters were meticulously excised.

This editing, it was argued, effectively eliminated any potential influence of the mass media on the jurors' judgments. But while this exercise may have removed the most obvious and direct sorts of influences, it may have left unchecked myriad more subtle and indirect influences. After all, jurors still had access to the sports section in which athletes like the defendant were glorified, if not deified, for aggressive behavior. Would exposure to the sports section in which individuals are lauded for pummeling, slashing, trouncing, and engaging in any number of other aggressive acts, somehow make the same behavior outside the sports arena more acceptable? Conversely, would seeing images of African American gang members lead jurors to interpret "evidentiary matters of fact" in a very different light? What about the incessant images of blonde beauties, many of whom seemed to bear an uncanny resemblance to the victim, Nicole Simpson, smiling back at the reader from virtually every page? In short, is it possible that what was left in the newspaper after the censoring could sway the jurors

just as much as what was cut out? The present article first explores how the activation of culturally shared racial and gender stereotypes through both factual and fictional media representations might influence attributions of responsibility and credibility and then offers recommendations to reduce prejudice.

Psychologists have long recognized that we do not enter the perceptual arena empty-handed but, rather, with what is sometimes referred to as perceptual baggage. Perceptual baggage includes our unique idiosyncratic collection of experiences, needs, and desires as well as more common, culturally shared beliefs. As Jerome Bruner has been pointing out for the past 50 years, the way in which we perceive the world around us is not merely a neutral registration of some external reality. Instead, perception involves an active construction that incorporates our past memories and expectations as well as the current context (see Bruner 1992 for a review). In an early illustration of this point, Bruner and Goodman (1947) had children from different ends of the socioeconomic spectrum estimate the physical size of coins. The less well-to-do children made a greater number of errors in their size estimates. Interestingly, neither the direction nor the magnitude of the errors was random, as one might have expected given differential levels of experience handling money. Among the less well-to-do children, as the value of the coin increased, so, too, did its perceived physical size. This suggests that an individual's internal needs and desires can influence perceptions even of something

as objective and incontrovertible as physical size. In demonstrating this, Bruner opened the door for the study of the extent to which our preconceptions and desires shape the far more subjective social reality.

Thus, according to Bruner and other cognitive constructivists, there is no pure percept. Rather, we tend to draw on our past experiences and present desires to "go beyond the information given" in a particular context (Bruner 1957, 41). If social reality arises out of the interaction of the individual mind and the external world as this constructivist framework posits, then by extension one could argue that there is likewise no pure fact. While a case could be made for this position, we cannot dismiss the overwhelming consensus in the way in which we perceive the world. Like the less well-to-do children in Bruner and Goodman's study, even our errors in judgment are not random but show a marked similarity. Where do we learn that the Irish are alcoholics, Californians are flaky, and Asians are good at math? While some of these stereotypes may be transmitted interpersonally, the consistency and pervasiveness of these and other cultural stereotypes suggest another route of transmission, namely, the mass media (see Durkin 1985a, 1985b, 1985c for a review).

#### THE MASS MEDIA AND THE PERPETUATION AND ATTENUATION OF CULTURAL STEREOTYPES

In 1922, Lippmann described stereotypes as "a very partial and inadequate way of viewing the world" (72). Perhaps nowhere is the view of minorities and women more partial

and inadequate than in the mass media. Content analyses reveal that men continue to be overrepresented on prime-time television by a ratio of 3 to 1 (Basow 1992). Moreover, the women who do appear are typically portrayed as passive, overemotional, dependent on men, and inordinately concerned with "getting rings out of collars and commodes" (Wood 1994, 232). A parallel problem exists with respect to depictions of African Americans, who, when they do appear, are frequently portrayed as drug-traffickers or criminals (Lichter et al. 1987).

More recently, however, there has been a shift away from purely stereotypic representations of women, ethnic minorities, senior citizens, and other stigmatized groups (Berry 1980; Lichter et al. 1987; Montgomery 1989; Seiter 1986). In fact, there has been a concerted effort in certain quarters to include counterstereotypic images, or images that run counter to the cultural stereotype. These counterstereotypes contain what Hewstone (1989) refers to as "disconfirming information" that directly contradicts the prevailing stereotype. For example, in *The Cosby Show*, audiences were presented with a nuclear African American family in which the father is a doctor and the mother is a lawyer. The rationale driving the proliferation of this and other counterstereotypic portrayals is that, through exposure to counterstereotypic examples, cultural stereotypes will be disconfirmed and rendered obsolete and, consequently, the prejudice that often accompanies them will be diminished.

Thus far, however, the bulk of research on media images has primarily monitored the prevalence of various depictions without directly assessing their impact (Friedman 1977; Signorielli 1985). Consequently, there exists scant evidence as to whether the presentation of such counterstereotypic images actually accomplishes the goal of reducing prejudice against members of a stereotyped group. In one such study, however, my colleagues J. Gerard Power and Gail Coover and I explored the extent to which a stereotypic or counterstereotypic media portrayal could prime social perception, making it more likely that subsequent incidents involving members of the stereotyped group would be interpreted along similar lines (Power, Murphy, and Coover 1996). More specifically, we tested the notion that media portrayals might operate intertextually (Gray 1989) and that even seemingly unrelated portrayals of African Americans or women could, in fact, influence later judgments of the guilt, innocence, or credibility of other members of these stereotyped groups.

Pilot surveys of undergraduates at a large West Coast university revealed that the four most frequent negative stereotypic attributes for African Americans were "lazy," "unintelligent," "aggressive," and "criminal." These elements of the cultural stereotype were integrated into an ostensibly autobiographical article written by a freshman named Chris Miller. A second version of the same article was also constructed that presented an African American Chris Miller in a counterstereotypic man-

ner, namely, hardworking, intelligent, gentle, and law abiding. It is important to note that the counterstereotype is not merely the positive elements of the cultural stereotype, for example, the suggestion that African Americans are musically gifted. Rather, counterstereotypic portrayals stress attributes that directly contradict or run counter to any element, negative or positive, of the prevailing stereotype. A third version of the article was designed to be equal in length and touched on many of the same topics but did not depict Chris Miller in either a stereotypic or counterstereotypic way.

Four hundred undergraduates were subsequently asked to fill out two ostensibly unrelated surveys. The first survey dealt with an evaluation of a proposed campus newsletter, titled *People and Places*. This newsletter was introduced as the pilot version of a newsletter that would feature a different first-person profile of a student and a different place on campus each month. In fact, it featured one of the three versions of our Chris Miller text. Having read the newsletter, participants were asked a series of questions regarding how effective and attractive they found the format and how interesting they considered the articles. Participants were then asked by another experimenter to complete a second, ostensibly unrelated survey dealing with opinions and attributions of responsibility with regard to various media events, including Magic Johnson's contracting the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and Rodney King's beating at the hands of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Our results indicate that being exposed to stereotypic and counterstereotypic portrayals did cue consistent interpretations of unrelated media events. Individuals who read a stereotypic portrayal of an African American Chris Miller were much more likely to make internal or personal attributions of blame with regard to Rodney King and Magic Johnson, suggesting that they somehow "brought it on themselves." Conversely, being exposed to a counterstereotypic portrayal led to more external or situational attributions of blame.

A parallel effect was found for stereotypic and counterstereotypic portrayals of women. Pilot surveys had previously determined the four strongest attributes for women to be "weak," "unintelligent," "overemotional," and "self-centered/shrewlike." After being exposed to a stereotypic, counterstereotypic, or neutral, control version of an autobiographical sketch by a blond, female Chris Miller, participants were asked the following:

The Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings raised some serious questions regarding sexual harassment in the workplace. Some believed Hill's testimony while others believed Thomas' testimony. On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 implies believing Hill and 10 implies believing Thomas, please indicate whose testimony you believe.

William Kennedy Smith was recently acquitted of raping Patricia Bowman. Some people believe Bowman's testimony while others believe Kennedy Smith's testimony. On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 implies believing Bowman and 10 implies

believing Kennedy Smith, please indicate whose testimony you believe.

Some people believe that spousal abuse is exclusively the fault of the husband whereas others believe that the wife can act to instigate the violence and therefore bring it on herself. On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 implies that the wife is completely innocent and 10 implies that she brings it on herself, please indicate your position.

Being exposed to a stereotypic portrayal of a female led individuals to doubt the credibility of Anita Hill (the woman who accused then Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment) and Patricia Bowman (the woman who accused William Kennedy Smith of rape), whereas exposure to a counterstereotypic portrayal increased the perceived credibility of these women. Similarly, the stereotypic version of the article resulted in more blame being directed at the wife in spousal-abuse situations, whereas the counterstereotypic version resulted in a tendency to direct greater blame at the husband.

In honor of the Annenberg conference on the "future of fact," I extended the gender stereotyping study by analyzing additional data that had been collected simultaneously with that just described. In this previously unreported data, 84 participants from the same subject pool (approximately half male and half female) were informed that Chris Miller, the woman featured in the newsletter, was fictitious. In other words, while the texts themselves were identical to the stereotypic and counterstereotypic conditions de-

scribed previously, participants in this condition were explicitly told that the student editors had fabricated Chris Miller to give readers a sense of the possible format of the proposed newsletter. These conditions will subsequently be referred to as the fictitious conditions, and the previous conditions where individuals thought that Chris Miller actually existed and had authored the article will be referred to as the factual conditions.

*Comparison of factual versus  
fictitious media portrayals*

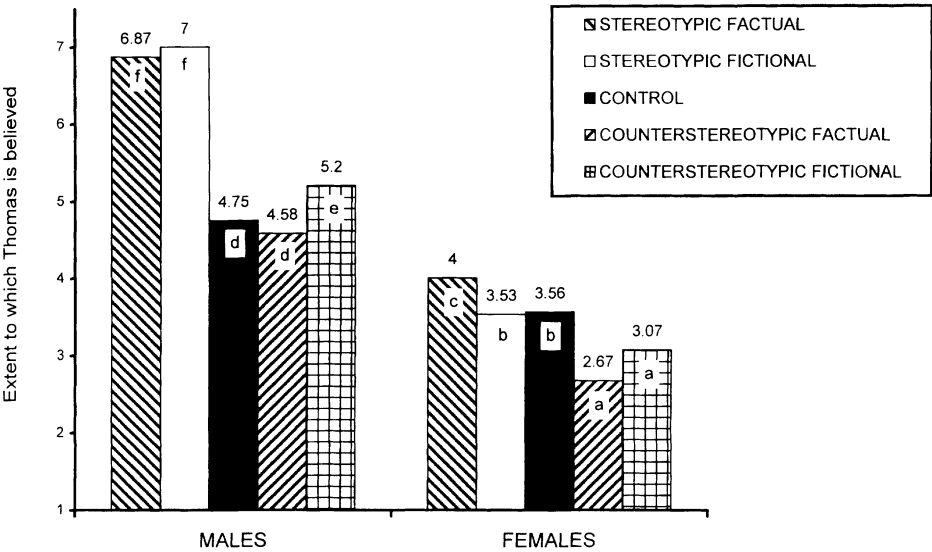
The common wisdom is that individuals are quite capable of distinguishing reality from fantasy, or fact from fiction. Moreover, it is widely assumed that our ability to discriminate between the two immunizes us from any potential effects of fiction. In other words, because fictitious information is categorized as such, it should not enter into our calibrations of reality. Several recent lines of work, however, suggest that this assumption may not hold. Gilbert (1991), for example, found that people tend to first give credence to anything they comprehend and only later evaluate and reject information they believe to be false. He suggests that acceptance of information may, in fact, be the cognitive default. Similarly, Prentice, Gerrig, and Bailis (1997) propose that "fiction, like fact, necessitates a *willing construction* of disbelief: Readers will initially accept the assertions in a fictional work as true and will subsequently reject those assertions only if they are mo-

tivated to and able to evaluate their veracity" (417).

Comparisons between the data described earlier from Power, Murphy, and Coover (1996) and the additional conditions in which participants were informed that the blonde female Chris Miller was fictitious may shed further light on the extent to which individuals discount fictional portrayals. Participants' reactions following exposure to the stereotypic (unintelligent, overemotional, weak, and self-centered or shrewlike), counterstereotypic (intelligent, level-headed, strong, and compassionate), and neutral, control versions of the female Chris Miller are quantified in Figures 1, 2, and 3.<sup>1</sup> The credibility of Anita Hill (Figure 1), Patricia Bowman (Figure 2), and women who have been sexually abused more generally (Figure 3) was clearly affected by the stereotypic, counterstereotypic, or neutral content of the newsletter article. Individuals who were exposed to the stereotypic Chris Miller were significantly less likely to believe Anita Hill and Patricia Bowman and were more likely than those in the counterstereotypic condition to believe that women who were abused by their husbands "brought it on themselves."

But it is also obvious that acceptance or rejection of the cultural stereotype of women depends at least in part on the gender of the reader. An analysis of the control conditions of the three dependent measures reveals that, even without any media portrayal intervention, men and women start out with very different opinions on these matters, with

FIGURE 1  
RELATIVE CREDIBILITY OF CLARENCE THOMAS AND ANITA HILL



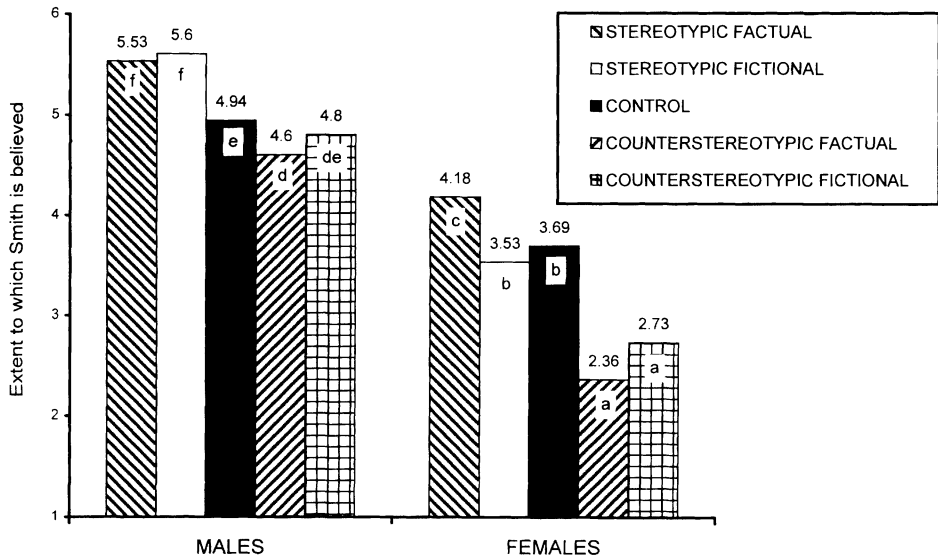
NOTE: Columns sharing a letter are not significantly different from one another at  $p < .05$  level.

women being far more sympathetic to members of their own ingroup (Tajfel 1982). The media portrayals seem to further exacerbate this initial gender-based disparity. Men who were exposed to the stereotypic Chris Miller were significantly less likely to believe Anita Hill and Patricia Bowman and were significantly more likely to hold women accountable for spousal abuse. Interestingly, for male readers, it did not matter whether they believed the text to be autobiographical or fictional, as both resulted in increased attributions of blame and decreased perceptions of credibility. For female readers, however, the stereotypic article resulted in a significant shift in judgment only when it was thought to be factual in nature.

The counterstereotypic portrayal likewise yielded a very different pattern of results for men and women. Reading an article about an intelligent, strong, level-headed Chris Miller tended to have a far greater impact on female readers. For females, the counterstereotypic Chris Miller resulted in significantly higher judgments of credibility with respect to Anita Hill and Patricia Bowman and lower attributions of blame with regard to spousal abuse regardless of whether they believe the article to be factual or fictitious. In contrast, while men appear to make some adjustments to their opinions in the appropriate direction when confronted with a “factual” counterstereotypic Chris Miller, they appear particularly prone to discount



FIGURE 2  
RELATIVE CREDIBILITY OF WILLIAM KENNEDY SMITH AND PATRICIA BOWMAN



NOTE: Columns sharing a letter are not significantly different from one another at  $p < .05$  level.

such a positive portrayal when it is presented as fictional.

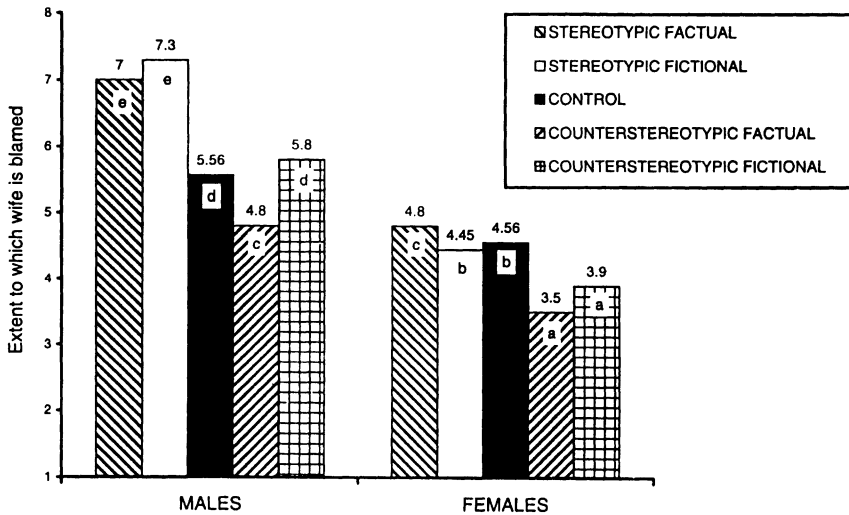
### CONCLUSION

In line with previous research (Power, Murphy, and Coover 1996), the current data demonstrate that being exposed to stereotypic and counterstereotypic portrayals can influence judgments of unrelated individuals and events. The present data also bolster the contention that the impact of media portrayals is heavily contingent on the reader's relation to or "position" (Hall 1982; Power, Murphy, and Coover 1996) with respect to the text. For instance, women were considerably more swayed by the counter-

stereotypic portrayal than were men. Conversely, men appear to be more susceptible to the negative stereotypic portrayal than their female counterparts.

Gender also played a key role in determining the relative weight given factual as opposed to fictional portrayals. For instance, men's judgments of the unrelated individuals and events were significantly swayed by a stereotypic portrayal of Chris Miller, regardless of whether they believed it to be factual or fictitious. Women, on the other hand, tended to discount the stereotypic fictitious portrayal but continued to be influenced by the fictitious counterstereotypic portrayal. In sum, it appears that fictitious portrayals are particu-

FIGURE 3  
ATTRIBUTIONS OF BLAME IN SPOUSAL ABUSE



NOTE: Columns sharing a letter are not significantly different from one another at  $p < .05$  level.

larly likely to be embraced or rejected based on the readers' underlying motivations and their position with respect to the protagonist. This serves to underscore Bruner's observation (1957, 1992; Bruner and Goodman 1947) that we are not merely passive observers but, rather, active architects of our own reality.

To return to the questions posed at the beginning of this article: were seemingly innocuous images of star athletes or blond beauties capable of influencing the O. J. Simpson jurors? The present data suggest that unrelated media images may indeed produce such unintended and insidious effects. The extent of the influence may be a function both of individuals' preexisting cognitive schemata and their motivation to maintain a particular worldview. Indeed, the idea

that media content may be understood in similar ways based on group membership or "interpretive communities" (see Power, Murphy, and Coover 1996 for a review) may account for the widespread gap in perceptions of O. J. Simpson's guilt between Anglos and African Americans.

### Recommendations

Admittedly, the effects observed, based on responses by undergraduates to a survey, are at least one step removed from actual judgments such as whether to convict, hire, or even walk on the same side of the street as another human being. At the same time, however, it is important to note that the demonstrated shifts in judgment were evoked by a single exposure to a portrayal that is far more

pallid than those readily available in the mainstream media. Operating under the assumption that repeated exposure to even more vivid stereotypic and counterstereotypic portrayals would have an even greater impact on individuals' judgments and beliefs, I draw from the extant research to offer the following policy recommendations.

1. *Inform both mass media producers and consumers of the potential impact of stereotypic representations.* Consider for a moment the long-standing use of stock characters in which cultural stereotypes are employed as a heuristic to cue the audience to the identity of a particular character. A young African American male dressed in baggy pants and a cap telegraphs a wealth of information to an audience by evoking our collective gang-member schema. While those responsible for producing newspapers, movies, and television programs are obviously aware of the power and efficiency of such images, we should not presume that they are equally cognizant of the long-term detrimental effects of such portrayals. It is egocentric to assume that those involved in production have the time or energy to devote to searching out relevant research published in fairly obscure academic journals.

As academics and as individuals who care about curtailing prejudice, we must strive to make our findings more accessible not only to industry professionals but to the general public as well. Research has shown that when the potential influence of a

prime is brought to an individual's attention, its power is virtually eliminated. For example, Schwartz and Clore (1983) have shown that the weather has a very systematic influence on judgments. For instance, when the weather is pleasant, people are much more positive in their overall assessments. However, when it is pointed out to them that the weather may be influencing their judgments, they self-correct and the effect disappears. Perhaps highlighting the effect of stereotypic portrayals would result in a similar diminution of effect.

2. *Avoid the temptation to focus on the so-called positive elements of racial and gender stereotypes.* As children, many of us were taught some version of "If you can't say something nice about someone, then you shouldn't say anything at all." Well-meaning individuals sometimes attempt to combat racism and sexism by drawing attention to the so-called positive elements of cultural stereotypes. It is important to realize that these elements comfortably coexist with their more negative counterparts. For instance, suggesting that women are nurturing is not incompatible with women also being overemotional. Likewise for African Americans, having athletic ability is not incompatible with being capable of physical aggression. Consequently, attempting to cast a particular group in a more favorable light by focusing on the so-called positive elements of a cultural stereotype may do more harm than good by making accessible (Tversky and Kahneman 1973) and

lending credence to the overall stereotype.

However, it may also be possible to dampen boomerang effects that might be associated with the positive elements of stereotypes. Work in psychology on cross-categorization (Marcus-Newhall et al. 1993) suggests that individuals who simultaneously belong to categories that do not typically co-occur—for example, people who are both Republican and African American—make us reexamine our preconceptions. Thus, when profiling an individual who exemplifies some positive stereotypic trait (such as an African American athlete), we might avoid activating the negative elements of the stereotype by also mentioning some dimension on which the same individual seems counterstereotypic (such as this athlete's enjoyment in doing the *New York Times* crossword puzzle).

3. *Encourage studios, networks, and newspapers to include more representations that challenge the cultural stereotype.* A single counterexample may be dismissed as an aberration or "subtyped" (Mauer, Park, and Rothbart 1995) as being an exception to the rule. Thus, numerous counterstereotypic examples spread over time would be necessary to slowly chip away at cultural stereotypes (Johnston and Hewstone 1992; Weber and Crocker 1983).

4. *Avoid counterstereotypic exemplars that are too atypical.* As Gray (1989) has noted, the representation of minorities in the mass media often depicts either deficient or highly

gifted individuals. Yet research clearly demonstrates that the atypicality of counterstereotypic examples is often cited as grounds for dismissing them (Kunda and Oleson 1997). For instance, a study by Murphy and Power (1997) evaluated the impact of a television series titled *Discovering Women* that profiled successful women scientists. They found that the more impressive the achievements of the woman featured, the less likely audience members were to consider her a typical woman. This perceived atypicality had a dramatic impact on the extent to which audience members felt that the female scientist's accomplishments could be replicated by another woman. In short, extremely atypical or deviant examples may be excluded from the relevant category and have no impact on the cultural stereotype or, worse yet, provoke boomerang effects that bolster the very stereotype they violate.

5. *Include factual as well as fictitious counterstereotypic exemplars.* A study by Hansen and Hansen (1988) demonstrates that even clearly fictional media representations can affect judgments of reality. In this particular study, participants who viewed sex-role stereotypic portrayals in rock music videos were more likely to interpret subsequent interactions between men and women in a consistent manner. As Hansen and Hansen note,

The impact of mass media fantasy depictions of sex role stereotypic persons and behaviors (even if they are recognized to

be stereotypic caricatures or fantasy) can be extended to the domain of the real by their capacity to prime biased appraisals of subsequently encountered real persons and behaviors. (212)

However, as the present article and other work demonstrate, the impact of a fictional representation on beliefs clearly depends on the relation of the reader to the text (Prentice, Gerrig, and Bailis 1997, 417). Individuals who are motivated to maintain the cultural stereotype need only point to the fictional nature of the counterstereotypic information as a basis for dismissal. Consequently, it is imperative that at least some counterstereotypic media representations be factual in nature.

6. *Do not ignore societal constraints by focusing exclusively on the individual.* Gray (1989) has argued that prevailing media representations of the successes and failures of individual African Americans shift attention away from the societal and structural underpinnings of racism. Along similar lines, Iyengar (1990, 1991) contends that episodic stories—stories that focus on specific individuals rather than societal themes such as racism or poverty—will draw attention to the individual actors. As a result, he argues, episodic stories will prompt audiences to seek individual determinants of social problems (for example, that poverty among African Americans is caused by their inherent laziness) and to ignore societal constraints. In other words, the subtext of such personalized portrayals may be that success or failure ultimately resides in the individual.

If Iyengar is correct, the outlook for using fictional media representations to combat racism and sexism appears bleak. Nearly all fictional accounts focus on individual protagonists rather than broad social themes. However, research by Strange and Leung (in press) suggests that stories about individual actors can emphasize either dispositional or situational causes of a protagonist's own success or failure. For instance, a story may portray a student who fails to complete high school either because he or she is lazy or because the school environment is not conducive to learning. These researchers showed that stories that focus on the situational underpinnings of problems faced by specific characters can prime situational or societal attributions of responsibility. This finding provides hope that, if social context is placed prominently in the foreground of the narrative, fictitious portrayals can promote consideration of systemic causes of success and failure. Strange and Leung further demonstrated that personalized accounts which foreground the social context of individual behavior are more likely to result in systemic, as opposed to individual-level, attributions of responsibility when they evoke "reminders of related experiences in a reader's personal or mediated past" (2). This suggests that the ability to empathize with the individual portrayed may play a key role in attributions of responsibility and blame. Indeed, media depictions that draw on more overarching or universal themes, such as birth, death, and family, which resonate across cul-

tures, may ultimately prove a powerful weapon against prejudice (Katz, Liebes, and Iwao 1991; Larsen and Seilman 1988).

### Note

1. The slight discrepancies in the means for the factual stereotype, factual counterstereotype, and control conditions reported here and those reported in Power, Murphy, and Coover (1996) are due to the inclusion of additional participants in those conditions.

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