

The representation of blacks on commercial television in Brazil: some cultivation effects

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RESUMO

A televisão comercial domina o horário nobre da transmissão no Brasil, obtendo 60 a 80% da audiência a cada noite. Este artigo compara o retrato dos negros brasileiros na TV com as opiniões sustentadas sobre eles por espectadores com alta e baixa exposição. O estudo mostra a divergência entre o conteúdo da TV, as condições objetivas da população negra brasileira e a opinião pública, sugerindo que a TV pode ter um efeito sobre as atitudes dos brasileiros quanto aos negros brasileiros. Os resultados são analisados nos termos da teoria de Gerbner dos efeitos de cultivo, da teoria do lapso de conhecimento e teoria do racismo moderno, com sustentação para as três.

Palavras Chaves: história do Brasil – negros brasileiros – publicidade – televisão brasileira

RESUMEN

La televisión comercial domina el horario principal de la transmisión en Brasil, logrando 60-80% de la audiencia cada noche. El artículo compara el retrato de los negros brasileños en la TV con las opiniones sustentadas sobre ellos por espectadores con alta e baja exposición. El estudio muestra la diferencia entre el contenido de la TV, las condiciones objetivas de la población negra brasileña y la opinión pública, sugerindo que la TV puede tener un efecto sobre las actitudes de los brasileños ante los negros brasileños. Los resultados son analizados en los términos de la teoría de Gerbner de los efectos de cultivación, de la teoría del lapso de conocimiento u de la teoría del racismo moderno, con sustentación de los tres.

Palabras claves: historia de Brasil – negros brasileños – publicidad – televisión brasileña

ABSTRACT

Commercial television dominates prime time broadcasting in Brazil, capturing 60-80 percent of the viewing audience each night. This paper compares the TV portrayal of Black Brazilians to the opinions held about them by heavy and light viewers, controlling for education and race. It shows the divergence between TV content, the objective condition of the Black Brazilian population, and an opinion survey, suggesting that TV may have an effect on Brazilian attitudes towards Brazilian Blacks. The findings are analyzed in terms of Gerbner's theory of cultivation effects, knowledge gap theory, and the theory of modern racism, finding support for all three.

Keywords: Advertising – Black Brazilians – Brazilian television – History of Brazil

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INTRODUCTION

McConahay, Hardee and Batts (1981) say a new attitude toward racial problems in the U.S. called "modern racism" is developing. According to this perspective, most U.S. Whites now believe that Blacks and other minorities no longer require social intervention programs to compensate for the effects of racism and discrimination in our society, since these have already been remedied by legislation. Minorities have already been overcompensated for any suffering or harm that may have come to them because of historically unfair treatment at the hands of their fellow Americans and everyone is now on an equal footing and anyone can succeed, regardless of race. Thus, there is no need for affirmative action, compensatory educational programs, etc. directed towards minorities in our society

Matabane (1988) and Gray (1989) have suggested further that in societies where racial inequality and discrimination exist, television may function to *reduce* awareness and sensitivity to the plight of Blacks. For example, the fact that the popular situation comedies, rarely deal with issues of racial conflict, economic exploitation and class relations, may lull viewers into thinking that such problems no longer exist.

Gerbner, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986) claim that television plays a key role in shaping our image of social reality, by providing us with a constant flow of images of the society in which we live. They say television's fictional and non-fictional programming is at variance with the facts of social reality, that is, TV presents a rather distorted image of society.

They describe the impact of heavy viewing of television on the viewer's world view as the "cultivation effect." Using U.S. data, they have shown the cultivation effect to operate regardless of the educational level of viewers. That is, being well-educated does not immunize heavy viewers from acquiring a distorted perception of the world, or acquiring mainstream political views (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli and Morgan, 1984). However, a review of knowledge gap research (Gaziano, 1983) suggests that those with less education would probably be more cultivated by television than those with more education.

In summary, heavy viewing of U.S. television programming has been shown to be positively correlated with distorted views of social reality, social problems and their origins. In addition, people who watch a lot of television, may be deceived into believing that social problems are less severe than they actually are (Volgy, 1988), or that they do not require any form of ameliorative governmental or public action. The educational level of the viewer moderates the effects of cultivation, influencing both its intensity and direction.

TELEVISION AND RACIAL ATTITUDES IN BRAZIL

Brazil is a country which shares a history of Black slavery and marginalization with the United States (Fernandes, 1969; Degler, 1971; Wagley, 1977), and has a substantial (40 percent) Black and Brown population. Asians make up less than 7 percent. U.S. research suggests a strong correlation between the attitudes about people of African origin and their portrayal on television (Jeffries-Fox and Signorielli, 1978; Berry and Mitchell-Kernan, 1982; Matabane, 1990). One might ask if there is a similar correlation between television viewing and attitudes towards Blacks in Brazil.

Some 95 percent of the population has access to television, which attracts 60-80 percent of the available audience during prime time (Kottak, 1990; Nielsen, 1990).

Recent research (Leslie, 1992; Subervi-Velez and Oliveira, 1991) on the content of Brazilian television indicates that Brazilian television reflects both the invisibility and powerlessness of Black and Brown Brazilians: They are seldom seen on Brazilian television programs or advertising – less than 10 percent of all air time. When they do appear, it is predominantly in stereotypical roles.

In testimonies to researcher Haroldo Costa (1988), a broad cross section of Brazilian Blacks said they felt psychologically marginalized and stereotyped in the mass media and in Brazilian cultural, political, economic and social life: some identified television as a prime source of unfavorable portrayals.

Abdias do Nascimento (1978), a noted Brazilian playwright, politician and social activist has uses the term "cultural genocide" to describe the impact of the Brazilian television's portrayals (and non-portrayals) of the Black Brazilian

population. The Brazilian historian Joel Rufino dos Santos (1988) and the anthropologist Sodré (1979) say Blacks and Browns are "invisible" on Brazilian television.

Non-fictional treatment of racial issue in Brazil can best be described as episodic and historical. Racial issues have been dealt with centrally in some telenovelas, such as *Escrava Isaura* and *Cor a Cor*, or during a special commemorative period such as the Centenary of the Abolition of Slavery, in May 1988. But while the centennial of the abolition of slavery produced a temporary outpouring of books, documentaries and discussion around the issue (Subervi-Velez and Oliveira, 1990), the issue of race, and the position of Blacks in Brazilian society, has been studiously neglected on Brazilian television. There are no serious, ongoing programs on Brazilian television in which the condition of Blacks (and Browns) in Brazilian society is examined and problematized (Kottak, 1990).

Brazilian society is infused with the myth of racial democracy, according to which discrimination in Brazil, based on skin-color is non-existent: allegedly, everyone has an equal chance to succeed (Freyre, 1987). This myth stands in sharp contrast to Brazilian economic, political and social reality (Wood, 1988; Hasenbalg, 1979; Oliveira, Porcario and Araujo, 1981; Moore, 1988; IBGE, 1990), but is deeply ingrained in Brazilian social thought (Viana, 1933; Rodrigues, 1957; Silva, 1989).

Thus, Brazil offers a good opportunity to test the cross-cultural robustness of the empirical relationships observed by Gerbner and Matabane between television viewing and the cultivation of racial attitudes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Recalling that Gerbner and others say television plays a key role in helping construct our image of social reality, one might ask how heavy viewing of Brazilian television correlates with viewers attitudes towards Brazilian Blacks. Do heavy viewers of television have different social attitudes about Blacks than light viewers? Do they have a distorted perception of Black Brazilian political potentialities? Do Brazilian heavy viewers' perceptions of social reality tend to be more at variance with sociological fact than light viewers' perceptions? How does the cultivation effect differ for each of the four major ethnic groups in Brazil? Finally, to what extent does the level of education of the Brazilian viewer moderate the cultivation effect?

METHODOLOGY

To answer these questions, a study of the television viewing habits and attitudes towards Blacks was conducted in Brazil in the summer of 1991. The sur-

vey was conducted by the leading Brazilian public opinion polling organization, IBOPE.

The universe from which the sample was selected consisted of voters in the most recent national elections. A national proportional quota sample of 3650 persons, representing both urban and rural residents was drawn, using such demographic criteria as sex, occupation, race, geographic location, age and education of the Brazilian population, as reported in the 1980 census.

The data was collected through personal interviews, administered by a team of IBOPE-trained interviewers. Interviews were conducted in the home, in the street or at work. The raw data was processed at the IBOPE headquarters in Rio de Janeiro and analyzed at the University of Florida, Gainesville, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

Four questionnaire items, adapted from a validated scale published by Shaw and Wright (1967), were used to measure Brazilian attitudes towards Blacks. Using a 4 point scale, with 1 representing complete agreement and 4 representing complete disagreement, respondents were asked to indicate to what degree they concurred with each of the following statements:

- 1) I consider marriage between persons of different races natural.
- 2) Racial discrimination exists in Brazil, but few would admit it.
- 3) If there was a Black candidate who was qualified to be President of Brazil, he/she could be elected.
- 4) If one of my best friend married a Black, I would stop inviting him/her to my house.

The predictor variables were race, education and daily TV viewing hours. Low education was defined as less than a 6th grade education while high education was defined as having completed college entrance examinations or gone to college. Light television viewing was defined as less than two hours per day of exposure and heavy viewing was defined as more than 6 hours per day. Values for the racial variable were Black, White, Brown and Yellow (Asian).

The respondents were divided into groups, composed of high and low scorers on the predictor variables, level of education and daily TV viewing hours. Means were then calculated for each group on each of the four dependent measures, controlling for race. Finally, the observed difference in means was tested for statistical significance. The results appear below.

RESULTS

Effects of Light vs. Heavy TV Viewing By Race (Table 1)

Question 1: IS INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE NATURAL? As shown in Table 1, the average score for this item was 1.3. Heavy viewers agreed most (1.2)

while light viewers agreed least (1.4). Black heavy viewers registered almost complete agreement (1.1).

Question 2: DOES RACIAL DISCRIMINATION EXIST UNACKNOWLEDGED? Heavy viewers tended to agree more with this statement than light viewers (1.5 vs. 1.9), with heavy White viewers showing the most agreement (1.4).

Question 3: COULD A QUALIFIED BLACK BE ELECTED PRESIDENT OF BRAZIL? While the average score was 1.3, heavy viewers averaged 1.2 while light viewers average 1.4. Yellow light viewers were least likely to agree (1.7) while heavy white viewers were most likely (1.1).

Question 4: IF YOUR BEST FRIEND MARRIED A BLACK, WOULD YOU STILL INVITE HIM/HER TO YOUR HOME? There was virtually no difference in the amount of disagreement with this statement, with both heavy and light viewers averaging 3.6. The strength of Asian disagreement was however somewhat lower, at 3.4.

The difference in the mean response for questions 1, 2, and 3 for heavy and light viewers was significant at the .001 level. There was no significant difference in the mean for heavy and light viewers on question 4. Thus, heavy television viewing appeared to be positively correlated with opinions regarding the social acceptability of Brazilian Blacks.

Effects of Level of Education by Race (Table 2)

Question 1: IS INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE NATURAL? As shown in Table 2, the majority of respondents strongly agreed that it is, with a mean score of 1.3. However, respondents with higher levels of education showed more agreement (1.1) than respondents with less education (1.5). Blacks with little education were more likely to agree with the statement (1.2) than Whites with little education. Educated Yellows agreed with the statement more than any other group (1.0).

Question 2: DOES RACIAL DISCRIMINATION EXIST UNACKNOWLEDGED? The mean score of 1.7 indicates that there was less agreement on this statement, with the highly educated agreeing most (1.3) and the low-educated agreeing least (2.2). Highly educated Blacks (1.2) and Yellows (1.1) agreed most that this was the case.

Question 3: COULD A QUALIFIED BLACK BE ELECTED PRESIDENT OF BRAZIL? The average agreement was 1.3, indicating generally strong agreement, with the highly educated averaging 1.2 and the low educated 1.5. Highly educated Blacks (1.4) and low educated Yellows (1.9) agreed least with this statement; highly educated whites agreed most (1.2).

Question 4: IF YOUR BEST FRIEND MARRIED A BLACK, WOULD YOU STILL INVITE HIM/HER TO YOUR HOME? The mean score for this item was 3.6, indicating generally strong disagreement with this statement. However, Yellows, regardless of education, were more likely to agree with the statement than other ethnic groups, averaging 3.3.

Means differences in the responses given by the highly and lowly educated Brazilians were significant at the .001 level. In other words, education had a consistent effect on attitudes towards Blacks, with highly educated expressing more favorable attitudes towards Brazilian Blacks than the less educated.

DISCUSSION

It is clear that the level of education of Brazilian voters in this sample correlates positively with the favorableness of their manifest attitudes towards Blacks, both socially and politically, as measured by this survey. The more highly educated the voter is, the more positive his/her manifest attitude appears likely to be. This finding concurs with U.S. research, which has found that manifest racial prejudice is strongest amongst the least educated American citizens.

A caution however is in order, since the expression of overt prejudice is socially unacceptable in both Brazil and the United States. Thus educated and aware respondents may have been inclined to give the politically correct response, rather than to express their true feelings about Blacks in response to each of these questions. The fact that the data was gathered using interviews, rather than anonymous questionnaires, may have further contributed to such an effect.

Also interesting is the finding that poorly educated Brazilians are least likely to recognize the presence of racism in Brazilian society. This denial has historical parallels in the U.S., where a substantial portion of the population also denies that racism towards Blacks and other minorities continues to persist. The fact highly educated Brazilians are more likely than less educated Brazilians to recognize the persistence of racial discrimination against Brazilian Blacks lends support to the knowledge gap hypothesis.

It should be noted that the amount of social and political acceptance of Black Brazilians appears to vary by ethnic group, with Yellows appearing to be the least accepting of interracial marriage and Blacks the most accepting. This

may be an indication that Blacks have accepted or find it expedient to give lip service to the racial democracy myth more than other minority groups in Brazilian society.

Low educated Asians and Blacks regardless of education had more difficulty believing that a Black candidate could be elected president of Brazil. Considering the 1993 experience of Black politician Benedita da Silva (Herscovitz, 1993), who encountered racial epithets and insults while campaigning for the post of mayor of Rio de Janeiro, they had grounds for this belief. The fact that educated Browns are more likely to believe a Black candidate electable also points to their relatively greater acceptance of the racial democracy myth.

Heavy exposure to Brazilian television correlates positively with belief in the racial democracy myth. Heavy TV viewers are more likely than light viewers to express liberal social attitudes towards Black Brazilians. However, they also seem to be more aware of the persistence of racial discrimination in Brazilian society. Thus, heavy television watching in Brazil seems to both sensitize viewers to Black social reality while intensifying belief in (or longing for) the democratic racial myth.

LIMITATIONS

Given the large sample size, and relatively small difference in observed means, the possibility of Type I error in this study is significant. Also, the use of four point rather than five point scales may have induced directionality in measurement, as would the social desirability of scale content. However, the fact that differences between groups could be observed despite these methodological flaws would indicate fairly robust effects for the predictor variables.

A better-designed future study could re-test these tentative observations.

CONCLUSION

Brazilian television helps sustain the myth that in Brazil a racial democracy exists, by neglecting to acknowledge, examine and discuss the generally unfavorable political, economic and social limits within which the majority of Black Brazilians live their lives. While ethnicity, education and television viewing habits moderate television's impact, heavy, less educated TV viewers are more likely than light viewers to be cultivated to view Brazil, erroneously, as a racial democracy. Thus, Brazilian television content may be a cultivator of modern racism in Brazil.

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Table 1: EFFECTS OF LIGHT VS. HEAVY TELEVISION VIEWING BY RACE

Q IS INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE NATURAL?			
		Mean	Cases
For Entire Population		1.3879	1913
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	LOW	1.5922	944
RACE	Black	1.4091	132
RACE	White	1.6288	361
RACE	Brown	1.6159	427
RACE	Yellow	1.6250	24
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	HIGH	1.1889	969
RACE	Black	1.0545	55
RACE	White	1.2289	651
RACE	Brown	1.1266	237
RACE	Yellow	1.0385	26
T=9.11, P. <.000			
Q2. DOES RACIAL DISCRIMINATION EXIST UNACKNOWLEDGED?			
		Mean	Cases
For Entire Population		1.7747	1913
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	LOW	2.2383	944
RACE	Black	2.2045	132
RACE	White	2.2604	361
RACE	Brown	2.2248	427
RACE	Yellow	2.3333	24
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	HIGH	1.3230	969
RACE	Black	1.2182	55
RACE	White	1.3333	651
RACE	Brown	1.3376	237
RACE	Yellow	1.1538	26
T=16.23, p. <.000			

Table 1: EFFECTS OF LIGHT VS. HEAVY TELEVISION VIEWING BY RACE

Q3 COULD A BLACK BE ELECTED PRESIDENT OF BRAZIL?			
		Mean	Cases
For Entire Population		1.3748	1913
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	LOW	1.5148	944
RACE	Black	1.5227	132
RACE	White	1.5069	361
RACE	Brown	1.4941	427
RACE	Yellow	1.9583	24
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	HIGH	1.2384	969
RACE	Black	1.4909	55
RACE	White	1.2104	651
RACE	Brown	1.2532	237
RACE	Yellow	1.2692	26
T=6.25, P <.000			
Q4 IF YOUR BEST FRIEND MARRIED A BLACK, WOULD STOP INVITING HIM/HER TO YOUR HOME			
		Mean	Cases
For Entire Population		3.6618	1913
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	LOW	3.5678	944
RACE	Black	3.5455	132
RACE	White	3.5983	361
RACE	Brown	3.5621	427
RACE	Yellow	3.3333	24
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	HIGH	3.7534	969
RACE	Black	3.8727	55
RACE	White	3.7343	651
RACE	Brown	3.8017	237
RACE	Yellow	3.5385	26
t=-4.25, p <.000			

Table 2: EFFECTS OF LEVEL OF EDUCATION BY RACE

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