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**AN ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN IMAGES ON THE COSBY SHOW
BY EUROPEAN-AMERICAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN VIEWERS**

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An Analysis of African-American Images on The Cosby Show
By European-American and African-American Viewers

An Abstract
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Janet L. Riggins
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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated African-American images on The Cosby Show as viewed by European-American and African-American students at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, Tennessee. It was designed to find out whether viewers believed the show is representative of black life and its experiences.

The study found that these pre-professionals do not believe The Cosby Show is representative of African-American life. Although a large number of each ethnic group thought that it was not representative, more blacks than did whites thought that its representation was accurate.

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To Graduate and Research Council

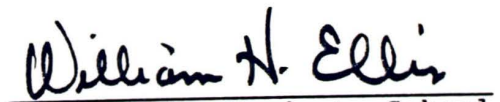
I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Janet L. Riggins entitled "An Analysis of African-American images on The Cosby Show by European-American and African-American Viewers." I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts with a major in Mass Communication.


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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In 1965, three major networks were monitored for five consecutive hours. During that period just three African-Americans appeared on the screen; two of them were on less than three minutes (Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, & Fontes, 1974). This is the period in which African-Americans were most notable for their absence on television (Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, & Fontes, 1974). By 1969, times were changing and African-Americans became commonplace on television (Hinton, et al, 1974). It was no longer their lack of appearance that had critics and African-Americans in an uproar, but the way in which they were portrayed when they appeared.

Cummings (1988) states African-Americans were given roles in the media that tended to strengthen and perpetuate the negative stereotypical images that European-American people had created. To see these same roles portrayed on television created an enormous disturbance in the minds of African-Americans and critics for the simple reason that despite how African-Americans had been portrayed in the popular media of film and radio, it was hoped television would reverse the misinformation surrounding African-Americans (Cummings, 1988). As it turns out, African-Americans were sadly mistaken about the positive images they thought television would portray of African-American

life and its experiences. They were also mistaken about the years they felt it would take to arrive at a point of change.

In 1991, it can be said that African-Americans have arrived at the point of change. The Cosby Show, aired by NBC on Thursday nights, depicts an African-American family in which the father is a physician, the mother is a lawyer, and the children are all college bound. Has The Cosby Show won a war that began over 40 years ago? This thesis gave African-American and European-American viewers a chance to respond to that question by voicing their opinions on the way in which images are being portrayed and African-American life is being represented in The Cosby Show.

Statement of the Problem

African-Americans are not necessary to get a high Nielsen rating, which is of the utmost importance to the businessmen who control television (Sanders, 1981). If African-Americans are not necessary to achieve high ratings, then they could very well be left out of the rating count which could cause the cancellation of African-American shows.

As we look at articles such as "Nielsen to Scope African-Americans" in the October 1990 issue of African-American Enterprise, we find that African-Americans many times have been left out of the rating count. Nielsen's

response to this problem was that African-Americans are too hard to locate (Sanders, 1981).

Carpenter (1985) concluded from his research that African-Americans watched 16 percent more television than European-Americans. If this conclusion is correct, why then are African-Americans excluded from the Nielsen ratings? To ascertain that they watch 16 percent more television than African-Americans, they had to be found, and in sufficient numbers to make a comparison. Therefore, Nielsen's stated reason for its exclusion of African-Americans in its ratings becomes null and void. It is also important to note that research done by Nielsen in 1989 on how often African-Americans watch television seems to indicate that the company has little or no problem accessing African-Americans for information. Nielsen discovered through its research that African-American households watch 74 hours of television a week compared to other households, which average 51 hours per week. It also found that African-American households typically have 2.8 viewers, compared with other households which have 2.6 viewers. Men in African-American households were found to watch 46 hours per week; women 52 hours per week; and children ages two to 17, 37 hours per week (Crispell, 1989). African-American households also tend to be slower to purchase video cassette recorders and be wired for cable (Findley, 1988). Whether this delay is a conscious decision or dictated by

income has not yet been discovered. These data communicate the actuality that African-Americans are the predominant viewers of television; therefore, they should, more than anyone else, be given the opportunity by Nielsen to rate the network shows they like or dislike. This dilemma initiated a response of criticism to Nielsen by African-American media representatives early in 1990 (Woodson, 1990). These representatives accused Nielsen of avoiding areas that are predominantly African-American, thus minimizing the potential impact African-American viewers have on a show's rating. Byron E. Lewis, president of the Uniworld Group Industries, a New York based firm, states, "If African-American viewers are not accurately recorded watching television, that is a matter that comes down to dollars and cents."

The question may now be asked - What is the Nielsen Company and how does the success or failure of shows rest on its research? The A. C. Nielsen Company is best known for its measurement of television audiences (Brown, 1982). There are two main divisions in television research: (1) Nielsen Television Index (NTI) which produces the ratings for network shows, and, (2) Nielsen Station Index (NSI) which concentrates on local market reports. There is also an additional service that produces demographic data known as Nielsen Audience Composition (NAC).

Although Nielsen's main business since the 1920's has been to tabulate the consumption of drugs and food by consumers from retailers, it is best-known for its television research, though that accounts for only 10 percent of its revenues (Brown, 1982). Nielsen got its start in media rating because of manufacturers' reliance on and respect for their reporting of consumer consumption from retail shelves. This in turn positioned them for new opportunities. One of these opportunities was the evaluation of radio advertising. With the help of an audimeter, an audience-counting device, they were able to introduce an audience measurement service which could document which stations were being listened to (Brown, 1982). Change brought on adaptation in the 1940s with the new emergence of television. The expansion of this new medium soon forced Nielsen out of radio and solely into television, in which it has very little competition. Its only competitor would be Arbitron, but in network television Nielsen virtually has the field to itself. So we find that the major problem with the rating of African-American shows is that African-Americans do not normally get to rate them. Any that have survived have been the ones which were acceptable to non-African-American audiences.

Definition of Terms

It is important that people of different backgrounds are able to gain enlightenment from television shows

through the images that are being portrayed in them. Often times we learn about a people's race and its culture from its representations on television. Many Americans who live outside of major urban centers seldom have interaction with, or even see, other minority group members (Defleur, 1991). Television is a major source of learning what these minorities are like.

Culture will be defined as the functioning of a society, its likes and dislikes evolving from taste acquired from surroundings and family training.

Race is the descendant of common ancestors, a family, people, or nation believed to be from the same stock.

Image would be an imitation, a representation, a reproduction, or a likeness of something.

Representation would be to present, by means of something standing in the place of. It may also be a sign or symbol of something.

African-American will be used throughout this thesis to identify Black-Americans. It is a term used by African-Americans to distinguish their majority racial heritage. The name African was kept out of respect for the forefathers who bore them (Berry & Blassingame, 1982).

European-American will be used throughout this thesis to identify White-Americans by their majority racial heritage.

Justification

Television, over the past three decades, has become the primary interpreter of American life and history, and a principal socializing institution in the United States (Dozier & Taylor, 1983). To what extent people are influenced by images they see on television is still being researched, but there is no doubt that television does have some effect (Warren, 1986).

How much of an effect does television have on our children? This is a major concern of many psychologists and parents today. And although it is not the topic of this thesis, it is an underlying concern for which it was written.

We know that television constitutes a major factor in the shaping of children's perceptions of social reality, and that programming which features African-Americans may play a special role in this process by molding their attitudes, values, and beliefs (Dozier & Taylor, 1983). The concern is that television will foster negative perceptions of African-Americans that may last a lifetime in both European-American and African-American children.

This concern is a valid one because of the high number of hours of television watched by children. Studies (Walling, 1990; Huston & Others, 1990) show that in the average American home, a television is on for almost half of all waking hours. It is estimated that adolescents

watch about 22 hours of television each week (Walling, 1990). These studies also show that young children are being exposed to television at an early age and spend more time watching television than in any other activity, except sleeping (Huston & Others, 1990). The average toddler was found to spend two or four hours per day watching television.

To what extent do European-American youth acquire knowledge and beliefs about African-Americans from watching television? "Television and Race Role Socialization," an article in the 1983 Autumn issue of Journalism Quarterly, states researchers' findings that African-American youngsters are influenced by television viewing, especially under certain psychological conditions. The article also says that young people who watch the most African-American programming tend to report that television teaches them most of what they know about African-American people. Those who are motivated to learn and who perceive African-American portrayals as realistic are also more likely to say they learn from television (Atkin, Greenburg, & McDermott, 1983).

A newspaper article written on September 4, 1988, in the New York Times, "Still Shunning the African-American Doll," revealed a problem that dealt with African-American children and African-American image. This study resembled Dr. Kenneth Clark's doll experiment used in the process of

eliminating segregation in Southern schools in 1952. African-American children were confronted with two images identical except for color. They were asked which was the prettier, cleaner, smarter image. The findings also resemble those of Dr. Clark's; most pointed to the European-American skinned image (New York Times, Sept. 4, 1988). Another article dealing with image, found in the USA Today, August, 1988 issue, entitled "Racial Stereotypes Persist," talks about a five-year-old African-American child who dashes out of a doctor's office in terror because he discovers that the attending physician is African. Alvin Poussaint, a Harvard psychiatrist, asserts that "something is very wrong with the cultural messages that child is receiving about African-Americans" (USA Today, Aug., 1988). In looking at these articles there is no assurance that these messages were attained through the medium of television. But as the editor of the African-American publication Essence magazine expressed, "Do our sons learn first in our homes that preferred hair coloring is blond? And do our daughters think less of themselves as a result of it?" (Alexander, 1990).

This thesis encourages African-American and European-American college students, who will be the decision-makers of the future, to take a good look at the images that are being portrayed in The Cosby Show. It is hoped that these findings will compel them to exercise their authority in

keeping shows like this one on the air or in changing the characters to make more preferable portrayals.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

World War II ended in 1945, bringing in its wake a period of revolution in America. African-Americans who returned home after fighting for their country were greeted with a new-found acceptance. A mood of patriotism loomed about the country. European-Americans' pride in African-Americans' contributions during the war almost out-weighed their prejudices against them. The operative word is almost, because they returned home to the same segregated conditions they had left behind. Nevertheless, African-Americans' popularity escalated after the war (MacDonald, 1983).

Television emerged during this post-war congratulatory period of African-Americans, which created an enormous problem for the new industry. Suddenly it was faced with a puzzling question? What was it to do about African-American portrayals? The country seemed to be accepting of them at that stage in the game, but how would they prefer to see them depicted, especially in the heart of the deep South? The depiction of African-Americans may not have been of much concern if television had not been a new medium. But since it had to re-direct its audience's attention from radio, which up to that point had been the primary form of entertainment for Americans,

African-American portrayals became a major concern. Television could not afford to present African-Americans in a way that would offend the European-American masses, especially since its funding was to be acquired in the same manner as radio, through advertisements (MacDonald, 1983). Advertisers needed to feel confident that television would be integrated into a majority of homes so that the enormous amount of money they would be spending to win over consumers would be worthwhile. So television had to fit the public's needs. But what were those needs in so far as they concerned the portrayals of African-Americans?

In the beginning, even with all the controversy, television seemed to cater to, and be kind to, African-American talent. They were allowed to appear on several variety shows, the Garry Moore Show, the Colgate Comedy Hour, the All Star Revue, The Jackie Gleason Show, and Your Show of Shows (MacDonald, 1983). African-Americans were even participants on game shows on which they broke the big bank. An African-American woman, Ethel Waters, won \$10,000 on Break the \$250,000 Bank. Another, a 74-year-old widow, won \$16,000 for her expertise on Shakespeare on The \$64,000 Question. At the end of the year, Ebony compiled totals that showed more than twenty-five African-American contestants had been prosperous winners on network quiz shows with a profit of more than \$500,000 (MacDonald, 1983).

African-Americans were also frequently high-lighted in sporting events. On the baseball field, one African-American, Jackie Robinson, managed to break down the color barriers when he played for the Brooklyn Dodgers. But African-Americans gained most of their exposure in the sports realm through boxing during the late 1940s and 1950s. The boxing era gave way to a showcase of talent. African-American participation was practically non-existent in many other sports for one simple reason, a lack of education. In order to participate in sports such as professional football and basketball, one had to obtain a college education, as it was from colleges that these athletes were selected. Since there was not a plethora of African-Americans entering the higher educational system during television's introductory years, they were not often depicted in these capacities (MacDonald, 1983).

African-American faces were also seen in the early religious programming of 1948. In this year, Dumont Network televised a well-known Washington, D.C., minister, Solomon Lightfoot Michaux. During this same year, the Southernaires, a gospel choir, was televised by ABC. Television Chapel, the first regularly scheduled Sunday program, even occasionally displayed an African-American congregation (Hill & Hill, 1985).

Uptown Jubilee, an all African-American variety program, was also introduced in 1949 on CBS. Uptown Jubilee, later known as Sugar Hill Times, was aired for thirteen weeks and then canceled. It is not known whether the cause was low budget or poor scheduling. The show was aired at the same time as the well-known, and well-liked, Milton Berle's Texaco Star Theatre (Hill & Hill, 1985; MacDonald, 1983).

In 1949, minstrels of past radio shows, thought dead, were resurrected and brought to home screens in the American Minstrels of 1949, and the Comedy Colgate Hour, where Eddie Cantor periodically appeared in "Blackface" for one or two songs. These negative portrayals were not well received and were quickly taken off the air (MacDonald, 1983).

Television once again portrayed its receptiveness to African-American talent in the 1950s by enlisting African-Americans to host shows. Hazel Scott has the distinction of being the first African-American woman to take on this task by hosting a fifteen minute show three times weekly. Singer Bob Howard was also one of these groundbreaker hosts for an early evening program on CBS. In 1950 through 1951 he also hosted the musical quiz show Sing It Again (MacDonald, 1983; Bogle, 1988).

There were two European-Americans who were very instrumental in gaining African-Americans employment in the television arena. One of these influential employers of African-American talent was Ed Sullivan with his Toast of the Town Show, later the Ed Sullivan Show. Sullivan felt that bringing African-Americans to television would undermine racism. He wanted to change the image of African-Americans in the minds of children because he felt they would be the ones to "put Jim Crow to rest" (MacDonald, 1983, p. 13). The other employer of African-Americans was Steve Allen. His Tonight program occasionally focused its whole segment on problems of pressing social interest to African-Americans (Bogle, 1988; Hill & Hill, 1985; MacDonald, 1983).

Negative stereotyping once again reared its ugly head in the 1950s in the form of the African-American maid. Beulah was the first to re-establish the norm of a precedent that had been set years before on the film screen with her characterization. Beulah, played by Ethel Waters, was the maid for the European-American Henderson family. On the show, she interacted frequently with her friend Oriole, a dim-witted African-American maid of the family next door, and her boyfriend Bill, who owned a fix-it shop. Beulah was, of course, always pleasant, constantly using broken English, and always fixing the household problems. She

never caused trouble and was happy to do anything the family needed (Bogle, 1988; Cummings, 1988; Hill & Hill, 1985; MacDonald, 1983). Warren (1986) would characterize her as a "mammy"; the stereotype's outward appearance is usually big, African-American, fat, and ugly while being sweet, jolly, and even-tempered. Beulah was just what the doctor ordered to calm the minds of white America: no threat.

After the cancellation of Beulah, another maid by the name of Louise stepped onto the scene. From 1953 to 1964, Lillian Randolph played Louise on Make Room for Daddy. It was one of the longest running comedies of the 1950s and 1960s. The Jack Benny Show proved that there was no male chauvinism by enlisting an African-American male helper in the 1950s. Eddie Anderson starred as Rochester, the chauffeur and general handyman (Brooks & Marsh, 1988).

The biggest controversy over the portrayal of African-Americans in shows came in 1951 when the popular Amos 'n' Andy radio depression-era comedy came to television. It gave a patronizing view of African-American America. The NAACP lodged a twelve-point protest against the program claiming that it would demean an entire race of people with its characterizations of African-Americans as lazy and shiftless (Wolcott, 1981). This show did do one good deed; it employed African-American actors. It

employed Alvin Childress as Amos Jones, Spenser Williams as Andy Brown, and Tim Moore as George Kingfish Stevens (Brooks & Marsh, 1988). The problem was that roles of these characters were so degrading that it became hard to see the employment of African-American actors as a plus. While the NAACP was seeking an injunction, the show was produced for two seasons before it was canceled, but continued in syndication until 1966. It took years of litigation for CBS to take the program off the air (MacDonald, 1983; Bogle, 1988).

The Nat King Cole Show was the first major television series with an African-American host. It gave America a new African-American image. The show collapsed after a fourteen month run in December of 1957, for lack of a sponsor (Hill & Hill, 1985).

The western era of the 1960s left only a trace of African-American faces. In this genre, African-Americans were either absent or only made rare appearances. They did, however, gain some recognition in detective stories, but only as local color characters. This was the case in Peter Gunn, which showcased the talents of James Edwards and Diahann Carroll (Brooks & Marsh, 1988).

In the days of the civil rights movement came Julia, played by Diahann Carroll. The show came at a time when the race riots were at a high point. Julia's

characterization embodied the European-American whitewash (being African-American but not exhibiting any form of African-American culture). Her character's complacent attitude was totally out of character for African-Americans during this time, although she did prove to European-American America that African-Americans could integrate their neighborhoods and their lives with no adjustment problems. Therefore, Julia represented a threat to both races. Even with the controversy the show was well received, but this was to be expected since it was the first show starring African-Americans in a series since the Amos 'n' Andy show (Bogle, 1988; MacDonald, 1983; Hill & Hill, 1985; Cummings, 1988).

Bill Cosby's I Spy brought meaning to the phrase "Black and Proud." This was the first series to exhibit pride in the race and culture. This pride in his heritage showed in the way his character dressed and in the African-American women he dated (Bogle, 1988).

Julia and I Spy were the most popular shows of this time, although their popularity did not seem to keep them on the air. In fact, most of the shows of this time period were canceled. For example, Barefoot in the Park which starred Scoey Mitchell and Tracy Reed, and which portrayed a young middle-class couple living in a New York apartment struggling through the first years of marriage, lasted for

only thirteen weeks. The cancellation of the show may have been because the theme was a bit over-used (MacDonald, 1983). Leslie Uggams' show was a failure after only three months. It was said to be because of her inexperience that the show was canceled and also the fact that the show was to replace the famous Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour. Any show that took its place was destined to fail (MacDonald, 1983).

The 1960s brought in with it a back to Africa movement. African themes were the basis for several shows such as Daktari, where Hari Rhodes portrayed a zoologist who assisted a European-American veterinarian in East Africa in protecting the local animals. Another show with this theme was Cowboy in Africa, in which a European-American rodeo star was hired to bring modern ranch techniques to a ranch in Kenya. The ever popular Tarzan was enacted during this period. Tarzan was demeaning to African-Americans in that it put forth an idea that African-Americans could not take care of their own problems and had to have the European-American man's help. He often solved the problems of the locals, always emerging victorious in his constant battles (Hill & Hill, 1985; MacDonald, 1983).

By 1965, change occurred and African-Americans began to appear on Westerns in such series as Rawhide, with Raymond St. Jacques as Simon Blake, one of the riders.

Roosevelt Greer, former football star for the Los Angeles Rams, appeared on Daniel Boone in 1969 as a regular for the last season. In The Outcasts, the most explosive of these westerns, Otis Young played Jemal David, a bounty hunter after the Civil War in the Wild West. He is shown to be excessively resentful of the slavery experience and shows this in his hostile attitude toward European-Americans. This hostile characterization coupled with the fact that westerns were no longer popular was the cause of The Outcasts' demise (MacDonald, 1983).

The best African-American starred show to arise in the 1960s was Room 222. Lloyd Haynes, cast in the role of a compassionate teacher, illustrates the African-American experience through his African-American history lessons at urban Walt Whitman High School. It gave way to an increased awareness of African-Americans by the European-American students who were enrolled in the class. This characterization gave a certain dignity to African-Americans that had gone unrecognized in shows past (MacDonald, 1983).

Respectable African-American role models were embodied in the 1970s in The Young Lawyers, where Judy Pace played a law student who formed an African-American law firm in Boston with several other African-American lawyers. Meanwhile, Hal Fredricks was achieving high distinction in

his status as an African-American role model in The Interns, on which he played one of five young interns (Bogle, 1988; MacDonald, 1983).

Not one of these respectable shows lasted longer than a year (Bogle, 1988). This brought an end to two decades of honorable portrayals and left the question of what would happen next to the African-American image hanging in the balance.

The 1970s put an end to the questioning with The Flip Wilson Show. This show set African-Americans back 20 years with characters that were pushy, impulsive, and brash, and bore a strong resemblance to those of The Amos 'n' Andy Show. He demeaned African-Americans with every flip of Geraldine's hip. Geraldine Jones was one of the characterizations done by Flip Wilson, as well as Reverend Leroy, Sonny the janitor, Freddy the playboy, and Charlie the chef (MacDonald, 1983).

The show had such success that Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin decided that there was money to be made in situation comedies starring African-Americans. Though their first show, All in the Family, starred no African-American talent at its conception, it played an integral part in demeaning African-Americans with its racial slurs and reinforcement of negative stereotypes. The show was designed to laugh with African-Americans, not at them, but it ultimately

produced a different effect. It only reinforced the prejudices felt by European-Americans. The lead character, Archie Bunker, a European-American bigot designed to show the ignorance of prejudice, was instead used as a role model for many European-Americans and as an introduction of racism to African-American children (MacDonald, 1983).

Lear continued to produce shows with negative stereotypes of African-Americans such as his next venture, Sanford and Son. This show characterized African-Americans as being poor, rude, and obnoxious. Next came What's Happening with loud mouth, harsh characters giving the impression that all African-Americans lived in the ghetto, were unemployed, and if not on welfare, were living hand to mouth (Cummings, 1988). The lyrics of the opening music sum up the theme for another of this type of show, Good Times, "striving and surviving-ain't we lucky we got em', good times." These series usually depicted enough of the ridiculous and the serious to keep a balance. Last, but not least, came The Jeffersons in which Lear changed format. In this show the lead character, George Jefferson, is portrayed as a successful African-American self-made businessman who is not emotionally dependent on European-American people for approval (Bonnie, 1981). As in All in the Family there are many racist comments introduced,

except this time it is the African-American lead character who is the bigot.

Sadly, the 1980s continued to accentuate negative stereotypes, while at the same time pretending to be responsive to demands for more African-American actors. In the beginning, shows enacted in this time period made it blatantly obvious that if African-Americans were to be successful, well educated, properly brought up in a supportive, nourishing environment, it was necessary for there to be European-American people at the head of their households (Cummings, 1988). One example of this was the show Different Strokes where the mother of two young boys dies and asks in her will that the boys be kept by her rich boss to give them a better way of life. The boss accepts this responsibility and the boys accept their new family, only longing for the old neighborhood periodically when they want to exhibit deviant behavior.

A similar theme is that of Webster where his professional football father dies and he is left to stay with his father's European-American friends. His new father and mother (whom Webster calls "Ma'm") are willing to accept their new challenge and take him under their loving and protective wings.

Gimme a Break is labeled the worst show to be established in the 1980s (Cummings, 1988). This show depicts a

maid who is large in size, happy, and musically talented, taking care of a European-American one-parent household. When this show was introduced, many critics felt that television no longer even attempted to be socially responsible (Cummings, 1988).

During this decade, the 1980s, came the appearance of Charlie and Company, 227, and The Cosby Show. These are three families with different social and economic backgrounds, although two, Charlie and Company and 227, are very similar.

Charlie and Company featured a middle-class African-American family with the father employed by the Transportation Department of the City of Chicago and the mother as a public school teacher. They live together with their school-aged children. The show was soon taken off the air, which might have been the fault of poor acting since Gladys Knight, playing the mother, and Flip Wilson, playing the father, were said to be novices in the acting field (Warren, 1986).

The situation comedy, 227, is about an African-American family residing in Washington, D.C. They are lower middle class, but are still able to live comfortably. This family is different from the previous family in that the mother is a homemaker and the main caretaker of their young daughter. Warren (1986) describes her as civic

minded because she often takes the lead in community problems. Another aspect that differentiates this show from other shows is the fact that the father is shown as the head of the household and makes the decisions that affect the family. Marla Gibbs, who plays the mother in this series, says she asked writers to portray their characters in this way because that is the way it is normally in African-American families (Warren, 1986). Her push for stronger roles for her television husband may have caused the show's demise because it created a lot of conflict among the writers, who felt themes were fine as they were, and the cast, who wanted to see the changes mentioned take place.

The final show of the three, The Cosby Show, depicts the African-American family in the best light. In this upper-middle class family, the husband, Cliff, is a physician; the wife, Clair, is an attorney. The five children of these characters, Theo, Denise, Sondra, Vanessa, and Rudi, are cheerful, amusing, and full of mischief (USA Today, 1988, p.12). We are introduced to friends and teachers throughout the show. When Bill Cosby, actor and producer of the show, first approached ABC with the idea for his show, it was turned down on the grounds that America was not ready to accept the concept of an

African-American upper-middle class family. The show was later aired by NBC and soon shot to the top of the ratings.

After the show was aired in 1984, it fell prey to the criticism of European-Americans. In the book, Images of African-Americans in American Culture, several European-American critics' voices were echoed. These critics concluded that the show was not "Black Enough." Obviously it failed to conform to their preconceived notions of what African-American family life is like (Warren, 1986). This statement raised an important question: What is "Black Enough"? What connotative meaning does this statement hold for European-Americans and African-Americans alike? If The Cosby Show at the time of this article was not representative of the way European-Americans viewed African-Americans, then what was? Have the views of European-Americans changed now that The Cosby Show is in its seventh season? And what about African-Americans? Do African-Americans feel the show is representative of their culture? My hypothesis is that African-Americans believe more than do European-Americans that The Cosby Show is representative of African-American life and its experiences.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects included in the study were Austin Peay State University students between the ages of 18 to 36 and over, ranging from freshman to graduate level. The total number of students participating was 175. Of the 175 participants, 116 were European-American, 59 African-American. The subjects for this study were gained on a purely voluntary basis.

Materials

The participants were given a questionnaire consisting of nine items concerning the characters in The Cosby Show (see Appendix B). The first set of questions was designed to find out the role model status of the characters. The second set was constructed to gain information on how representative the show is of African-American culture. The closing questions, which were open-ended, gave the researcher some insight on which characters could be changed to better represent the African-American society. Each participant was asked to answer certain biographical data which would be significant in the findings. These data consisted of sex and race. There was an accumulation of other biographical data such as age and year in college

which was used to paint a background picture of the students but was not cross-referenced in relation to answers.

Procedure

Access to students was gained through classes, which were willingly provided by instructors. Students were also accessed in the University Center and the Department of Speech, Communication, and Theatre at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, Tennessee. Each of these participants, whether collectively or individually, were informed of the purpose of the study and told that they were guaranteed anonymity. Each was required to sign an informed consent statement (see Appendix A) attached to each questionnaire before answering any questions. The statement informed them that there would be no risk or discomfort to them when filling out the forms. In the interest of maintaining confidentiality, students were instructed to remove the signed forms and place them in a different pile from the answered questionnaires.

CHAPTER 4

Results

The total number of participants in the study was 175. Of these 175, 116 were European-American and 59 were African-American, which is in keeping with the ratio of European-Americans to African-Americans attending Austin Peay State University. Ages were recorded from 18 to 36 and over. Also catalogued were years first through sixth in college.

Of the European-Americans participating in the study, 57.6% were aged 18 to 21, 31% were 22 to 25, 4.3% were from ages 26 to 30, 3.4% were 31 to 35, and 3.4% were in the 36 and over bracket. Of the African-Americans participating, 78% were aged 18 to 21, 17% were aged 22 to 25, with 5.1% being listed as 26 to 30. There were no African-Americans who participated in the study who were in the 31 to 36 and over age brackets. As to year in school, European-Americans were listed with 16.4% in their first year of college, 18.1% in their second year, 32.8% in their third, 25.9% in their fourth, 6% in their fifth, and 0.9% in their sixth year. Of the years in college listed by African-Americans, 10.2% were in their first year, 47.5% in their second year, 27.1% in their third, 8.5% in their fourth, and 6.8% in their fifth year of college.

When presented with the question, "How often do you watch The Cosby Show?" 19.8% of European-Americans answered always or almost always, 56.9% answered sometimes, and 23.3% answered almost never or never. African-Americans presented with the same question answered 64.4% always or almost always, 30.5% sometimes, 5.1% almost never. There were no answers of never by African-Americans (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Responses by Percentages, Sex, and Ethnic Identification to Question 1: How Often Do You Watch "The Cosby Show"?

	<u>African-Americans</u>			<u>European-Americans</u>		
	Male (n=22)	Female (n=37)	Total (n=59)	Male (n=50)	Female (n=66)	Total (n=116)
Always	18.2	21.6	20.3	8.0	6.1	3.4
Almost Always	40.9	46.0	44.1	62.0	22.7	16.4
Sometimes	36.4	27.0	30.5	30.0	53.0	56.9
Almost Never	4.5	5.4	5.1	0.0	16.7	22.4
Never	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	0.9

When asked if the character Cliff was a good role model, European-Americans answered 75% always or almost always, 21.5% sometimes, 2.6% almost never, and 0.9% never. African-Americans registered Cliff to be a good role 83.1%

always or almost always, 15.3% sometimes, and 1.6% never (see Table 2).

Table 2

Participant Responses by Percentages, Sex, and Ethnic Identification to Question 2: Do You Feel the Character, Cliff, is a Good Role Model?

	<u>African-Americans</u>			<u>European-Americans</u>		
	Male (n=22)	Female (n=37)	Total (n=59)	Male (n=50)	Female (n=66)	Total (n=116)
Always	54.6	40.5	45.8	12.0	27.3	20.7
Almost Always	31.8	40.5	37.3	50.0	57.6	54.3
Sometimes	9.1	19.0	15.3	32.0	13.6	21.5
Almost Never	4.5	0.0	1.6	6.0	0.0	2.6
Never	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	0.9

Clair was thought by European-Americans to be a good role model 90.9% always or almost always, 15.5% sometimes, 0.9% almost never, and 0.9% never. African-Americans thought Clair to be a good role model 83.0% always or almost always, 15.3% sometimes, 1.7% never (see Table 3).

Table 3

Participant Responses by Percentages, Sex, and Ethnic Identification to Question 3: Do You Feel the Character, Clair, is a Good Role Model?

	<u>African-Americans</u>			<u>European-Americans</u>		
	Male (n=22)	Female (n=37)	Total (n=59)	Male (n=50)	Female (n=66)	Total (n=116)
Always	77.2	54.1	62.7	16.0	37.9	28.4
Almost Always	18.2	21.6	20.3	56.0	53.0	54.3
Sometimes	4.6	21.6	15.3	26.0	7.6	15.5
Almost Never	0.0	2.7	1.7	2.0	1.5	0.9
Never	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9

When European-Americans were asked if they thought Cliff was representative of African-American males, 16.4% of them answered yes, 74.1% no, 6% sometimes, 3.4% gave no answer. African-Americans were over twice as likely to say that Cliff is representative of African-American males with 37.3% answering yes. However, the majority, 57.6% said he was not representative with only 5.1% with only 5.1% answering sometimes (see Table 4).

Clair's being representative of African-American females answered by 25% of the European-Americans as yes, 65.5% no, 5.2% sometimes, 4.3% registered no answer. A large number of African-Americans answered yes, 52.5%,

though the no answers were close with 42.4%, 3.4% said sometimes, and 1.7% gave no answer (see Table 5).

Table 4

Participant Responses by Percentages, Sex, and Ethnic Identification to Question 4: Do You Feel the Character, Cliff, is Representative of African-American Males in Society Today?

	<u>African-Americans</u>			<u>European-Americans</u>		
	Male (n=22)	Female (n=37)	Total (n=59)	Male (n=50)	Female (n=66)	Total (n=116)
Yes	54.6	27.0	37.3	12.0	19.7	16.4
No	45.4	64.9	57.6	76.0	72.7	74.1
Sometimes	0.0	8.1	5.1	6.0	6.1	6.0
No Answer	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.0	1.5	3.4

Table 5

Participant Responses by Percentages, Sex, and Ethnic Identification to Question 5: Do You Feel the Character, Clair, is Representative of African-American Females in Society Today?

	<u>African-Americans</u>			<u>European-Americans</u>		
	Male (n=22)	Female (n=37)	Total (n=59)	Male (n=50)	Female (n=66)	Total (n=116)
Yes	59.1	48.7	52.5	22.0	27.3	25.0
No	40.9	43.2	42.4	66.0	65.2	65.5
Sometimes	0.0	5.4	3.4	6.0	4.5	5.2
No Answer	0.0	2.7	1.7	6.0	3.0	4.3

European-Americans gave these answers for which of the children were representative: 42.2% Theo, 19.8% Vanessa, 1.7% Rudi, 2.6% Sondra, 19.8% Denise, 1.7% all, 3.4% said none of them were, and 8.6% gave no answer. African-Americans asked the same question gave these answers: 54.2% Theo, 8.5% Vanessa, 5.1% Rudi, 5.1% Sondra, 18.6% Denise, 3.4% all, 5.1% answered that none of them were representative (see Table 6).

Table 6

Participant Responses by Percentages, Sex, and Ethnic Identification to Question 6: Which of the Huxtable Children, if any, Do You Feel Most Represents African-American Teens You Know in Society Today?

	<u>African-Americans</u>			<u>European-Americans</u>		
	Male (n=22)	Female (n=37)	Total (n=59)	Male (n=50)	Female (n=66)	Total (n=116)
Theo	68.2	46.0	54.2	50.0	36.4	42.2
Vanessa	0.0	13.5	8.5	6.0	30.3	19.8
Rudi	4.6	5.4	5.1	0.0	3.0	1.7
Sondra	9.1	2.7	5.1	2.0	3.0	2.6
Denise	9.1	24.3	18.6	18.0	27.2	20.0
All	4.5	2.7	3.4	4.0	0.0	1.7
None	4.5	5.4	5.1	6.0	0.0	3.4
No Answer	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.0	0.0	8.6

When asked which one of the teen characters they would change, European-Americans said 6.9% Theo, 6.0% Vanessa, 2.6% Sondra, 24.1% Denise, 1.7% said all of them should be changed, 28.4% said none of them should be changed, 27.6% gave no answer. African-Americans stated 11.9% Theo, 6.8% Vanessa, 8.5% Rudi, 10.2% Sondra, 39% Denise, 3.4% all, 15.3% said none, and 5.1% gave no answer (see Table 7).

Table 7

Participant Responses by Percentages, Sex, and Ethnic Identification to Question 7: Which One of the Teenaged Characters Would You Change?

	<u>African-Americans</u>			<u>European-Americans</u>		
	Male (n=22)	Female (n=37)	Total (n=59)	Male (n=50)	Female (n=66)	Total (n=116)
Theo	13.6	10.8	11.9	8.0	6.1	6.9
Vanessa	4.6	8.1	6.8	0.0	10.6	6.0
Rudi	4.6	10.8	8.5	4.0	1.5	2.6
Sondra	0.0	16.2	10.2	0.0	4.6	2.6
Denise	36.4	40.5	39.0	10.0	34.9	24.1
All	0.0	5.4	3.4	4.0	0.0	1.7
None	36.4	2.7	15.3	36.0	22.7	28.4
No Answer	4.6	5.4	5.1	38.0	4.6	27.6

Totals should not equal 100%

The extended characters that European-Americans feel better represented African-American culture were 12.1% Pam,

3.4% Martin, 1.7% Olivia, 1.7% Lance, 1.7% Charmaine, 1.7% grandparents, 27.6% none and 55.2% gave no answer.

African-Americans listed Pam 50.9%, Charmaine 25.4%, Lance 18.6%, Olivia 1.7%, Martin 5.1%, none 18.6%, with 22% giving no answer (see Table 8).

Table 8

Participant Responses by Percentages, Sex, and Ethnic Identification to Question 8: The Cosbys' Nuclear Family Has Been Extended on the Show. Is There a Character(s) Which You Feel Better Represents African-American Culture Than the Huxtable Children?

	<u>African-Americans</u>			<u>European-Americans</u>		
	Male (n=22)	Female (n=37)	Total (n=59)	Male (n=50)	Female (n=66)	Total (n=116)
Pam	22.7	67.6	50.9	4.0	18.2	12.1
Martin	9.1	2.7	5.1	2.0	4.6	3.4
Charmaine	9.1	35.1	25.4	0.0	1.5	1.7
Lance	9.1	24.3	18.6	0.0	3.0	1.7
Elvin	4.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Olivia	0.0	2.7	1.7	0.0	3.0	1.7
Grand- parents	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.0	1.5	1.7
None	36.4	8.1	18.6	30.0	21.2	27.6
No Answer	36.4	13.5	22.0	56.0	54.6	55.2

Table should not equal 100%

The shows with a predominantly African-American cast that European-Americans felt to be representative of African-American culture were 23.3% A Different World, 11.2% Family Matters, 6% Fresh Prince of Belair, 3.4% 227, 2.6% Amen, The Jeffersons, and Good Times, 1.7% In Living Color, 0.9% Fat Albert, Sanford and Son, and The European-American Shadow. The number of European-Americans stating that they did not know any shows that were better representative was 33.6%. Those giving no answer at all were 20.7%. The list for African-Americans consisted of these shows 33.9% Different World, 33.9% Family Matters, 10.2% Good Times, 8.5% Fresh Prince of Belair, 3.4% Charlie & Company, 1.7% In the Heat of the Night, Frank's Place, The Jeffersons, Sanford and Son, 227, and Amen. The answer of "all shows" was given 1.7% of the time by African-Americans with 20.3% listing no other shows and 3.4% giving no answer at all (see Table 9).

This study indicates that African-Americans feel Cliff is a good role model more than do European-Americans most of the time though both show strong support. The same was found to be true of Clair. Although both African-Americans and European-Americans seemed to like Cliff and Clair and felt them to be someone they could aspire to be like, they

Table 9

Participant Responses by Percentages, Sex, and Ethnic Identification to Question 9: Have You Seen Any Television Shows with Predominantly Black Casts That You Feel are Representative of African-American Culture?

	<u>African-Americans</u>			<u>European-Americans</u>		
	Male (n=22)	Female (n=37)	Total (n=59)	Male (n=50)	Female (n=66)	Total (n=116)
227		2.7	1.7	0.0	6.1	3.4
Different World	31.8	35.1	33.9	12.0	31.8	23.3
Amen		2.7	1.7	0.0	4.6	2.6
Family Matters	36.4	32.4	33.9	4.0	16.7	11.2
Good Times	13.6	8.1	10.2	4.0	1.5	2.6
Fresh Prince	9.1	8.1	8.5	4.0	7.6	6.0
Heat of the Night		2.7	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Frank's Place		2.7	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Charlie & Co.		2.7	3.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
The Jeffersons	4.6	0.0	1.7	2.0	3.0	2.6
Sanford & Son	4.6		1.7	2.0	0.0	0.9
White Shadow			0.0	2.0	0.0	0.9
Fat Albert	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.0	0.0	0.9

(table continues)

Table 9 (continued)

	<u>African-Americans</u>			<u>European-Americans</u>		
	Male (n=22)	Female (n=37)	Total (n=59)	Male (n=50)	Female (n=66)	Total (n=116)
In Living Color	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.0	0.0	1.7
All Shows	0.0	2.7	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
None	27.3	16.2	20.3	42.0	27.3	33.6
No Answer	9.1	0.0	3.4	24.0	18.2	20.7

Table should not equal 100%

consistently answered that neither was representative of African-American life and its experiences. Even though both leaned strongly toward the Huxtables not being representative, the end result was African-Americans felt more than did European-Americans that The Cosby Show was representative of African-American life and its experiences, which is consistent with the hypothesis.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

Is The Cosby Show "black enough"? What is the connotative meaning of this phrase? In talking with participants, it was learned that "black enough" was equated with the financial position of the Cosby family. Though more African-Americans felt The Cosby Show to be representative of African-American life than did European-Americans, an overwhelming majority of the participants in this study, both European-American and African-American, say, "no it is not." A number of this group confided that they knew no African-American families with two professionals; therefore, the characters of Cliff and Clair were not found to be representative of African-American culture. This researcher was told that since a person's taste in food, clothing, music, and the like, could be linked to how high one has climbed the financial ladder and that since most African-Americans tend not to be as financially stable as the Huxtable family, it would not be representative in this way either.

African-American females found Clair to be more representative of African-American females than Cliff is of African-American males. African-American males also concluded more often that both were representative. This could be in light of the fact that they see themselves as

being pre-professionals and aspire to be like Cliff Huxtable, or have families with good role models, which is their reason for continuing their education. European-Americans, both male and female, leaned more toward neither Cliff nor Clair being as representative, giving the indication that they seldom see an African-American professional.

Clair was indicated by both African-Americans and European-Americans to be a good role model more often than was Cliff. Since it has been found that the Cosbys are not seen as being representative of African-Americans because of the professional roles they assume in the work place, then it would be safe to presume that Cliff's profession is not the cause.

Theo was found by both African-Americans and European-Americans to be the most representative of African-American teens in society today. The fact that, in the show's earlier years, Theo was considered to be an underachiever who could never quite make the Huxtable grade would seem to make this choice a rather demeaning one. But as the seasons rolled by, Theo's trouble in school is found to be caused by a learning deficiency called dyslexia. He is now overcoming his reading problem and doing very well in college. He is even depicted as a student counselor, helping lower-class African-American children with similar problems to realize their dreams. Theo is the only one of

the children who reaches down to help pick up his African-American "brothers and sisters." One African-American participant indicated in her questionnaire that the Huxtables are in the position for which African-Americans are striving, but have not yet reached. Theo is the Huxtable offspring that represents African-Americans trying to fit into the Huxtable mold. In this respect, the answer that Theo is the most representative is a positive one.

Denise gained the highest number of votes in the category of teen character they would like to change by both races. She was said by each to lack goals. Her behavior was characterized as irresponsible and reckless. Denise's style of dress was said to be impractical and frivolous. A European-American participant in the study felt that Denise made fun of African dress.

Pam, Cliff and Clair's cousin, a newcomer to the show, was said to represent African-American culture more than the Huxtable children. Pam also conveys the struggling African-American teen myth. This indicates a consistency with earlier answers of Theo being the most representative of the Huxtable children, that African-Americans have not reached the Huxtable plateau.

When asked, had they viewed any television shows with predominantly African-American casts they felt represented African-American culture, African-Americans and European-

Americans listed A Different World more often than any other. Obviously this is a show with which both can identify. One reason could be that this is the setting in which most students see African-Americans. The diversity of the characters' roles, social and economical, could also be a major factor for European-Americans and African-Americans.

The show with the second highest rating was Family Matters. The family's middle-class status could have earned it its high rating. An astonishing number of European-Americans gave no answer to this question. This could indicate that they do not watch shows with predominantly African-American casts, or as some participants stated they did not know enough about African-American culture to answer the question, which would mean that their previous answers were derived from other sources. These sources could have been televised news stories such as documentaries or feature stories, or certain types of literature.

This study left room for more related research in the area of image and African-Americans portrayals on The Cosby Show. Further study may consist of questions such as, "Is the fact that Cliff is the prankster in the family the cause of his low role model status?" "Is the contributory factor to his low role model status that he is portrayed

more often in the home than at work; therefore, there is the feeling that he is fostering an attitude of laziness?" Or finally, "Does the way Cliff helps to solve his children's problems with humorous anecdotes seem not to deal with the seriousness of the problems, thereby promoting a bad example of how to approach problem solving?" or, "Would Denise's style of dress be more acceptable by those in the region in which the show is taped?" The fact that the setting of The Cosby Show is in New York may have direct bearing on Denise's weekly fashion statements.

Finally, would the outcome of these statistics have been different had the research been conducted at a predominantly African-American university? In this type of setting, African-American students may have come in contact with more African-American professionals, ie., instructors, doctors, lawyers, and may be more apt to conclude that The Cosby Show is representative of their race and culture. The same might be true of European-American students attending these same universities who, by being in the minority, would have a closer relationship with African-Americans.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Statement

The purpose of this study is to find out if The Cosby Show is representative of African-American culture and its experiences. Your responses are confidential. At no time will those who participate be identified nor will anyone have access to your responses other than the researcher and her graduate committee. The information collected will be used only for the purpose of analysis. Your participation is completely voluntary and greatly appreciated. You are free to discontinue your participation at anytime.

Thank you for your cooperation.

I agree to participate in the present study being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Paul Shaffer of the Department of Communication at Austin Peay State University. I have been informed in writing about the procedures to be followed and that there will be no risks or discomforts involved. The researcher has offered to answer any further questions that I may have regarding these procedures. I understand that I am free to terminate my participation at any time.

Name (Please Print)

Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

PARTICIPANTS IN THIS STUDY ARE GUARANTEED ANONYMITY.

Course of study: _____

State: _____

Age: 18-21 22-25 26-30 31-35 36 or over

Sex: Male Female

Race: European-American African-American Other: _____

Year in College: 1 2 3 4 5 6

Circle the response which YOU feel best answers the question.

1. How often do you watch The Cosby Show?

Always Almost Always Sometimes Almost Never Never

2. Do you feel the character, Cliff, is a good role model?

Always Almost Always Sometimes Almost Never Never

3. Do you feel that the character, Clair, is a good role model?

Always Almost Always Sometimes Almost Never Never

4. Do you feel the character, Cliff, is representative of African-American males in society today?

Yes No

5. Do you feel the character, Clair, is representative of African-American females in society today?

Yes No

6. Which of the Huxtable children (Theo, Vanessa, Rudi, Sondra, Denise), if any, do you feel most represents African-American teens you know in society today?

7. Which one of the teen-aged characters would you change, and why?
8. The Cosbys' nuclear family has been extended on the show. Is there a character or characters which you feel better represents African-American culture than the Huxtable children? If so, please list them.
9. Have you seen any television shows with predominantly African-American casts that you feel are representative of African-American culture?