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The Portrayal or Betrayal of Minorities:
Examining *Ugly Betty* through Multiple Theoretical Perspectives

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Introduction

In 1993, Johnson and Kerew wrote an open letter to The Caucus for Television Producers, Writers and Directors. In that letter, the authors sought to raise awareness in two areas regarding minorities in television. The first area of concern was the lack of minorities in “non-traditional casting.” The call was made for directors to actively cast minority actors for roles that are not defined solely on race or ethnicity. The second area concerned the portrayal of minorities on television and film. Specifically, Johnson and Kerew (1993) posed the question as to whether or not television was providing positive role models for minority viewers. They asked if the face of minorities that is shown on television is a true reflection of our society. That question has continued to be a focus of current research.

To extend some of the current research on minorities in television, this paper will explore Johnson and Kerew’s (1993) areas of concern by applying multiple theoretical approaches to the television show *Ugly Betty*. The origin of *Ugly Betty* is from the Spanish television show, *Yo Soy Betty La Fea*, which translates in English as I am Betty, the ugly one. Both the Hispanic and American versions fall into the hybrid category of a drama-comedy, or “dramedy” (Princeton Review, 2006). The basic storyline of the show is centered on Betty Suarez, her immigrant family, and her new position at Mode, a well-known and highly regarded fashion magazine. Betty’s lack of aesthetic beauty and social conventions, that are notably present in the fashion culture, are often the cause of problems and misunderstandings that fuel the storyline in each episode.

Ugly Betty was specifically selected for this investigation because of its appeal to a young demographic group that includes the culturally diverse Hispanic population residing in the United States (Barney, 2007). Since its debut in the fall of 2006, *Ugly Betty* has maintained

viewer ratings and has won two Emmy Awards. One was for America Ferrera's portrayal of the main character, Betty Suarez. The other was for best director in a comedy series. In light of the popularity of this show and the call for more racially and culturally responsive television by Johnson and Kerew (1993), one must wonder if the characters in *Ugly Betty* offer a balanced portrayal of Latinos and other minority groups, or if these fictional roles are a betrayal of the reality or the real-world roles that minorities hold in our society.

Literature Review

Johnson and Kerew (1993) were not the first to address the issues surrounding the portrayal of minority groups on television. Five years earlier, Carlos Cortés (1987) wrote that the roles of minority characters that appear on popular television shows affect not only the perceptions that others hold of minority populations, but also the view that minority groups have of themselves. For Cortés (1987) and others (Ingham, 1995; Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Ortiz, 2007; Rivadeneyra, Ward, & Gordon, 2007) the question as to whether or not fictional television characters can alter the perceptions we hold of real people in our society has been the underlying premise for their continued research in the area of media and psychology. This area of research has sought to answer questions regarding the how the media, particularly television, can influence existing stereotypes that involve gender roles, race, and ethnicity. And, how do these stereotypes affect the development of self concept in the individual members of minority and majority groups.

Ingham's (1995) work regarding the portrayal of woman on television revealed that women are underrepresented in both television commercials and soap operas. When women are present, their roles often reflect sex-role and sex-trait stereotypes. According to Ingham (1995), sex-role stereotyping includes the traditional gender roles of women as primary care-takers. The

evidence is clear in roles of fictional mothers and wives on television who are often punished or depicted as villains when they abandon their traditional household responsibilities in order to pursue a career. Ingham (1995) also describes sex-trait stereotypes as the portrayal of women as more emotional and neurotic than their male counterparts. The question remains, how do these stereotypes of women on television affect our perceptions of women in society? And, how do these stereotypes affect the development of self-concept in women?

The most recent research that specifically targets the influence of fictional Latino characters on television on the perceptions and development of self-concept of Latino viewers has been published in *Media Psychology* (2007). Two studies were conducted by Rivadeneyra, Ward, and Gordon (2007) to determine if a relationship exists between the frequency of media exposure, the media involvement of the viewers, and the development of self-esteem and body-esteem of Latino adolescents and young adults. The researchers describe the difference between media frequency and media involvement through two theoretical lenses. According to Rivadeneyra, Ward, and Gordon (2007), media frequency is related to cultivation theory which posits that frequent media exposure will lead to the cultivation of beliefs about the real world that reflect the images presented in the media. Media involvement, or the depth at which the viewer interacts and makes personal connections with the content presented, is related to social cognitive theory. It is believed that the more cognitively engaged the viewer becomes with the content, the more likely s/he will identify with that content on a very personal level (Rivadeneyra, Ward, & Gordon, 2007). The results of these two studies show that although the correlations between media use, viewer involvement, and self-conceptions of Latino viewers varied, Rivadeneyra, Ward, and Gordon (2007) found that lower self-esteem in Latino

participants was associated with greater exposure to media and deeper involvement with television.

In addition to researching the effects of the media's portrayal of minorities on individual minority group members, others (Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Ortiz, 2007) have used cultivation theory to explore the effects that minority roles on television have on the White majority population. Specifically, Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, and Ortiz (2007) gathered data using surveys to understand the perceptions and attitudes of White university students regarding the portrayal of minority groups in primetime drama series. Employing what they term a mental models approach, they sought to determine if White students who lacked real world experiences with minorities would be more likely to rely on television to cultivate their perceptions and attitudes of Latinos. The researchers categorized Latino portrayal on television in terms of criminality, intelligence, and work ethic as these areas are often subject to stereotypes. The results of the study show positive correlations between the amount of exposure to stereotypical television content and the cultivation of unfavorable attitudes and perceptions of Latinos by the White participants.

Evaluating Ugly Betty

In reviewing the literature, there appears to be several theoretical perspectives that can be used to evaluate the portrayal of minorities in the popular dramedy *Ugly Betty*. First, based on the work of Cortés (1987) and Johnson and Kerew (1993), an evaluation should seek to answer questions regarding the role models that are provided through the minority characters on television. Second, the portrayal of minority women should be examined to determine if sex-trait and sex-role stereotypes continue to exist. Lastly, the potential for developing positive or

negative attitudes towards the minority groups represented in *Ugly Betty* should be examined vis-à-vis the theoretical lenses of cultivation theory and social cognitive theory.

Ugly Betty: From Season One to Season Two

May 15, 2007: Season One Finale

The final episode of season one ends as a cliffhanger that involves all the main characters. They include Betty Suarez and her family: her father Ignacio, her sister Hilda, and her nephew Justin. Other main characters are associated with *Mode* magazine, where Betty is employed as the administrative assistant to the editor, Daniel Meade. They include Daniel's transsexual sister Alexis; his father Bradford, the assumed owner of *Mode*; and his mother Claire, the real owner of *Mode*. Also at *Mode* are the past editor Wilhelmina Slater; her homosexual assistant Marc; the young, blond receptionist Amanda; the Scottish seamstress Christina; and Betty's admirer, an accountant named Henry Grubstick. Additional characters in this episode include two of Claire's African American prison mates who help her to escape; Santos, Hilda's fiancée and Justin's father who is shot in a convenience store robbery; Charlie, Henry's ex-girlfriend who claims to be pregnant with Henry's child; and Betty's dental hygienist, who serves as her romance advisor.

The episode begins with Betty on the phone with her father, who has been deported to Mexico and is currently trying to obtain a visa to return to his family and their home in Queens, New York. Her sister Hilda, an unemployed single mother, is planning to marry Justin's father. Justin, Hilda's son who is very effeminate, is practicing for the lead role in a school musical. Across town in Manhattan, another wedding is being planned. Since Claire's incarceration for the murder of Fey Sommers, who was a former editor at *Mode* and mistress to Bradford, Wilhelmina Slater has been romantically involved with Bradford. Wilhelmina's goals are to

marry Bradford in order to take control of Mode Magazine. She has been actively seeking the position of editor-in-chief since Bradford gave that position to his promiscuous, drug using son Daniel. To help Daniel conquer his addiction, his sister Alexis attempts to drive him to a drug rehabilitation center, but they are both seriously hurt when the brakes on their vehicle mysteriously fail. As Daniel and Alexis lie on the side of the road, Claire Meade, distraught that she is losing her husband, her family, and Mode magazine to Wilhelmina, escapes during a transfer to a new prison.

To add to the complexity of the Meade family's problems, Amanda learns, with the help of Christina, that she is really the illegitimate product of an affair between Fey Sommers and Bradford Meade. As Justin sings the final song in the school play, his father, Hilda's fiancée, is shot as he tries to deter a convenience store robbery. While all of this takes place, Betty is hopeful that she and Henry will finally have their first date, only to have it ruined by Charlie's revelation that she is pregnant with Henry's child. By chance, Betty's dental hygienist reveals that Charlie has been romantically involved with Betty's dentist. But, as Betty prepares to stop Henry from going to Tucson with Charlie, the police notify her of the convenience store shooting. Instead of going to the airport, she goes to be at her sister's side.

September 27, 2007: Season Two Premiere

The storyline continues from season one with Daniel and Alexis in the hospital, recovering from the car accident. While Daniel continues to abuse pain-killers, Alexis remains in a coma. Betty assumes the role of primary care-taker for her nephew Justin while her sister mourns the loss of her fiancée, who died from a gunshot wound he sustained as an innocent bystander during an attempted robbery. Also keeping Betty busy and from dealing with her own broken heart are the legal battle to obtain a visa for her father and her responsibilities at Mode

that include helping Daniel retain his job as he recovers from drug addiction and a car accident. Overwhelmed, Betty inadvertently walks into a large glass screen and falls unconscious. Christina accompanies her to the doctor's office where Betty refuses to reduce her workload and stress. However, after Betty misses the appointment with her father's lawyer, it is Daniel who extends his hand in friendship. He helps Betty to bury the keepsakes of her broken relationship with Henry as well as his own bottle of painkillers so that they may each start life anew.

The Meade family drama takes a new twist when Claire decides to return to Manhattan to confront Wilhelmina in person. With the help of her ex-prison mate, an African American woman, she deceptively lures Wilhelmina into thinking that she will sign over the rights to Mode in exchange for an end to Wilhelmina's engagement with Bradford. However, Claire rescinds her offer and the viewers are left to wonder what Claire, Wilhelmina, and Bradford will do next. In addition to this plot, the subplot concerning Amanda's biological parents continues. Desperate to know the identity of her biological father, Amanda continues to over eat and gain weight. Marc lends a hand, helping to investigate whether or not Bradford is her biological father, but the viewer must wait to learn results of the secret DNA tests. In the final few minutes of this episode, Daniel enters the ICU ward where Alexis remains in a coma. She awakens when she hears Daniel's voice, but in a shocking end, she forgets she is a transsexual and states that she is Daniel's brother, Alex.

October 4, 2007: Season Two, Episode Two

In this episode, Betty's honesty and integrity are challenged. Having illegally gained entrance into Wilhelmina's house to recover the plans for the next issue of Mode, Betty and Christina are privy to information about an affair that Wilhelmina is having with her new bodyguard. However, Wilhelmina discovers that Betty could share this damaging information

with Daniel and Bradford, which would jeopardize Wilhelmina's chances of marrying Bradford in order to gain control of Mode. She makes Betty an offer. If Betty is willing to keep Wilhelmina's affair quiet, then Wilhelmina will help Betty's father get a visa to return to the United States. After much contemplation, Betty decides to take Wilhelmina's deal, even though it means she will deceive Daniel in the process. What is worse is that Daniel has specifically stated that Betty is the only person he can trust at Mode.

A number of subplots continue to unfold in this episode as well. Amanda decides to keep a hairless dog that is the only existing connection to her biological mother. Marc trains Justin, who is serving as an intern at Mode for a few weeks. And, Hilda continues to mourn the death of Santos. Justin, who initially seems to be unaffected by the death of his father, unknowingly enters the convenience store where his father was killed. The owner tells Justin that his father was a good man and that Justin will surely be just like him. However, Justin tells the man that he is not at all like his father and he leaves the store. Later, back at the Suarez house in Queens, NY, Hilda decided to keep only one item from Santos' things and tells Justin to do the same. He chooses a basketball. In the next scene, the Suarez family learns that Ignacio's visa has been approved. As Betty and Hilda are celebrating the upcoming return of their father, Henry appears at the Suarez home. Although rather drunk, Henry tells Betty that he has learned about Charlie's affair with the dentist. Now that the baby might not be his, Henry professes his true feelings towards Betty. The closing minutes of this episode show Ignacio preparing his return to United States. All of a sudden a man with a gun enters the house and threatens to kill him.

Multiple Theoretical Perspectives

In describing the three episodes of *Ugly Betty* it is rather difficult to capture the complexity of the characters as they alternate between the humor of a comedy and the

seriousness of a drama. To examine how certain characters might be perceived as role models for minority viewers requires a more in depth look. Several questions based on previous research come to mind. What types of minority role models are present? Are there sex role and sex trait stereotypes? And, using the theoretical lenses of cultivation theory and social cognitive theory, how might viewers form positive or negative attitudes and perceptions of minorities based on what is portrayed in these three episodes?

To begin, it is important to note that there are seven central minority female characters and 6 central minority male characters. Of the seven female characters, Betty and Hilda are Latinas, Wilhelmina is an African American, Alexis is a transsexual, and Christina is a recent immigrant from Scotland. Of the six male characters, Ignacio is Latino, Marc is homosexual, and Justin is a Latino that displays effeminate mannerisms that might lead one to believe that he is homosexual. Of the minority female characters, Betty Suarez is perhaps the strongest positive role model. She is the direct opposite of her sister Hilda, who portrays the Latina stereotype of being lazy, less intelligent, and highly emotional. While Hilda is often scantily clad in hip hugging jeans and a notably revealing blouse, Betty opts to dress much more conservatively. Also conservative are Betty's display of emotions. Even with the pressures of being the primary caregiver and wage earner of the Suarez household, Betty shows just enough of her emotions for the viewer to make a personal connection. Yet, Hilda is a likable character as her concern for Betty is evident. She often attempts to help her younger sister solve problems that inevitably arise at Mode.

The remaining female minority roles are much less likable. Perhaps the most villainous is Wilhelmina. She is a beautiful, intelligent, high-powered figure in the fashion industry who is obsessed with becoming the editor-in-chief of Mode. Her deceit permeates essentially her every

word. Although Alexis and Christina are devious from time to time, Christina offers true friendship to Betty and is often involved in Betty's on-going defense against Wilhelmina's evil plots. Alexis's character is less defined in these three episodes. Initially it seems that she is another evil force against Daniel. However, as his sister, she begins to show a gentler, kinder side when she offers to drive him to a rehabilitation center. Therefore, with the exception of Wilhelmina's evilness and the evidence of sex role and sex-trait stereotypes (Ingham, 1995), there is a sound positive role model in Betty Suarez and evidence of a balance between good and evil in the remaining female minority roles.

The six minority male characters also straddle the line between positive and negative role models. Although Ignacio is a kind and loving father, he is guilty of murdering a man who was in love with his late wife. Justin, the youngest character in the show, adores his Aunt Betty but struggles with his disapproving parents. Hilda and Santos love their son, but through their words and actions they are clearly uncomfortable with his effeminate mannerisms. Because these mannerisms are stereotypical of homosexuality, viewers are left to wonder if Hilda and Santos are homophobic. A typical pre-adolescent, Justin often struggles to make the right choices. However, a viewer can empathize with his character because of his youthful innocence. Less likeable is Marc, the homosexual assistant to Wilhelmina. Marc is often an accomplice to Wilhelmina's plans to sabotage the current editor-in-chief, Daniel Meade. When Marc does offer to help another character in need, he is often obnoxious and hurtful in the process.

How then might viewers use these role models to cultivate their own attitudes and perceptions of minorities? How might a viewer's social and cognitive involvement with these fictional characters and the content of the show become part of the formation of self-image, self-esteem, and self-concept? It would be presumptuous to predict with any certainty the potential

positive or negative impact of the minority role models based on three episodes of *Ugly Betty*. Nevertheless, there is evidence of stereotypes in *Ugly Betty* that previous studies have correlated to the negative attitudes towards minorities by members of the White majority (Rivadeneria, R., Ward, L.M., & Gordon, M., 2007) as well as the negative self-images that minority group members develop of themselves (Cortés, C., 1987; Johnson, C.F. & Kerew, D., 1993; Mastro, S, Behm-Morawitz, E., & Ortiz, M., 2007).

Ugly Betty contains numerous examples of negative minority portrayals. First, the only African Americans that are present in these three episodes are a female convict, the villainous Wilhelmina, and her male security guard, with whom she has an affair even though she is engaged to marry Bradford. Second, there is some evidence of homophobic behavior by Santos and Hilda. Also, the role that Marc plays of a homosexual in the fashion world is marred by his collaboration with Wilhelmina. Lastly, although Betty does provide a positive role model for young Latina viewers, the presence of Latino stereotypes is undeniable. Cortés (1987) and Mastro Behm-Morawitz, and Ortiz (2007) have found that the negative portrayal of minorities on television is related to how minority viewers perceive themselves. It can lower their self-image, self-esteem, and overall development of their self concept. And, as Rivadenerya, Ward, and Gordon (2007) have found, when White viewers do not have real-life experiences to counter these negative portrayals, they use the fictional minority characters on television to form their personal attitudes and perceptions about real-life minorities.

Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

Whose responsibility is it to ensure that the representations of minorities in television accurately reflect reality? How can we educate the White majority who may currently rely on television for images of minorities? Currently there does not appear to be a set of guidelines for

critically analyzing television programs for possible bias. If such guidelines were to exist, then the writers, producers, and directors could evaluate their shows in the production phase and make decisions that would allow for a more balanced representation of minority characters. This balance ought to include the number of minority roles as well as the portrayal of minorities in those roles. The guidelines should be modeled after scholarly writings that specifically focus on a multicultural approach. For example, the work of Paul Gorski (1999) on developing a multicultural approach for evaluating educational web sites asks the evaluator to consider “whose voices are being included, whose voices are being excluded, and for what purpose? (p.1)” If writers, producers, and directors are willing to test the portrayals of minorities in their shows against a set of multicultural guidelines, then perhaps they could provide more positive experiences with which viewers can use to cultivate their own attitudes and perceptions. However, addressing the potential biases and stereotypes of minorities in television is only part of the equation.

When we ask whose voices are being included or excluded, we acknowledge that one group must have the power to make those decisions. Who are the writers, producers, and directors? Do they represent minority groups? Are they aware of the power they wield when it comes to the portrayal of minorities? When White teachers, lawyers, police officers, doctors and other professionals in positions of power rely on television to form their attitudes and perceptions of minority groups, and those portrayals actually betray the richness of a culture, the result is often the production and re-production of stereotypes. If we are to break the systemic cycle of the production and re-production of minority stereotypes, then we must educate those in the majority. This education should include promoting the advancement of minorities to positions of power within our society. The call then, is for scholars in the field of multicultural education to

work with researchers in the field of media and psychology. Their goal should be to provide multicultural experiences that challenge existing stereotypes. If through multicultural education programs, we can educate our educators by providing them with positive experiences with which to build their attitudes and perceptions of minority groups, they in turn will educate their students using the same approach. Eventually, these students will comprise the next generation of actors, writers, directors, and producers who may lessen the betrayal of minorities on television by accurately portraying them as productive members of our society.

Resources

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