Chapter 36
Channeling Race:
Media Representations and International Student Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

The late Stuart Hall argued depictions of race in media most appropriately should be examined as ideology, since a main sphere of media operation is the production and transformation of ideologies. These ideologies are not isolated concepts but articulations of a variety of cultural signifiers into a chain of meanings that are often presented as statements of nature. Such meanings can produce troubling outcomes on U.S. college campuses when arriving international students' first and often only exposure to race in America is the nation's continued struggle with equality as portrayed in exported film and news spectacles portraying blackness as a social threat. This chapter examines how media representations can flavor cross-cultural interactions, and the implications these interactions may have for campus climate, diversity initiatives, and the increasingly multicultural and globalized work place.

INTRODUCTION

"Why don't you have your license on you?" asked Cincinnati, Ohio Police Officer Tensing, while standing outside of the car window of Ray Dubose. Mr. Dubose responded: "I just don't – I'm sorry, sir. I'm just gonna go [in] the house." Then Officer Tensing asked Mr. Dubose to get out of the car. Several quick moves later by both parties and Mr. Dubose is fatally shot in the head, his car propelled forward by the weight of a dying man heavy on the accelerator (Williams, 2015). There is almost no need to mention the race of either man, since we see this scenario in America with increasing frequency: An allegedly fearful white police officer looming over a clearly fearful black driver. The whole tragic moment is captured on the officer's body cam and the video circumnavigates the globe via social media. These

tragedies play out almost daily in the U.S., as an unarmed black man is routinely killed by a U.S. police or other security officer approximately every 28 hours (Hudson, 2013).

This apparent form of Constitutional racism has haunted non-white U.S. citizens since America's inception, but has only recently sprung onto our high definition nightly news screens and mobile devices in alarmingly skyrocketing frequency. One scholar calls it Negrophobia – the irrational fear of black people –, resulting in the regular harming or homicide of blacks by whites based almost exclusively on stereotypes of monolithic proportion (Armour, 1997). Given America's dominance in global media markets, distributing a full one-third of all filmed entertainment alone (PwC, 2015; Roth, 2015b), these representations likely have implications for perceptions of African Americans by global citizens in general and specifically for international students arriving for their first extended stay in the United States.

Meanwhile, American politicians struggle to address a public groundswell proclaiming "Black Lives Matter", and depictions of people of color in other nation's media also are becoming increasingly troubling. As the 2008 U.S. Presidential campaign heated up, an eMobile cell phone advertisement in rotation on Japanese television featured a chimpanzee dressed in a suit, giving a speech to a cheering crowd holding signs calling for "Change!" The thinly veiled reference to then-candidate Barack Obama was not lost on either Japanese or American audiences who called for the commercial to be taken off the air because of its racist overtones (The Guardian, 2008).

Hall (2011) argued media representations of race and racism are problems of ideology, since a main sphere of media operation is the production and transformation of ideologies. His definition of ideology encompassed images, concepts and premises "which provide frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and *make sense* of some aspect of social existence" (Hall, 2011, p. 81). These ideologies are not separate or isolated concepts but are an articulation of meanings producing different forms of social consciousness, and tend to disappear into a taken-for-granted world of common sense (Hall, 2011). While ideologies are worked on in a variety of social settings, media are important sites for their production, reproduction and transformation, since media represent the social world and provide frames for understanding how the world is and why it works in the ways it does. While media assist us to grasp the meanings of success, unemployment, freedom and democracy, the media also construct for us representations of what race is, what meanings racial imagery carry, and what the *problem* of race is understood to be (Hall, 2011).

Media depictions of people of African descent exported from America to the rest of the world are often problematic and fraught with stereotypes (Dikotter, 1997; Fujioka, 2000; Johnson, 2007; Russell, 1991; Talbot, 1999). As international students, particularly Chinese, become a larger portion of the U.S. higher education landscape, it is unclear how relations between these students and domestic African American students will unfold. However, it is apparent media representations of race likely will have implications for cross-cultural interactions.

Previous perception studies of visual media suggest media does more than simply provide information about events, and individuals take in and interpret information selectively (Blackman, 1977; Gilliam, 2000). Further, Tobolowsky (2001, 2006) argued U.S. prime time television has implications for minority women's perceptions of what to expect from college campus life, and both Postman (1979) and Horn (2003) concluded media possess the elements of curriculum and, arguably, should be viewed as such, given their ability and purpose to train, inform, inspire, enlighten, entertain or otherwise engage the mind of an individual (Roth, 2015c). These findings are consistent with Kretch and Crutchfield (1973) who argued individuals perceive and interpret information in terms of their "own needs, own emotions, own personality, own previously formed cognitive patterns" (p. 251).

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