

Portrayal of African Americans in the Media: An Examination of Law and Order

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Abstract

Television media is one of the most powerful tools used for entertainment and information in this generation. Hence, it should feature accurate portrayals of racial groups in order to erase the hierarchy that exists between people in today's society. This study will examine the portrayal of African Americans in the media over a twenty year time span within the television crime drama *Law and Order*, and will be used to determine whether the media exaggerates its portrayal of African Americans in the media.

Introduction

Stereotypes are preconceived assumptions based upon the characteristics and behaviors of all members of a particular group. These assumptions are often commonly held beliefs that are thought to be true by many people in a population (Power, Murphy, Coover, 1996). Stereotypes have extended into the root of society mainly through media outlets such as the television. Many Americans rely on television as a source of information and entertainment; thus, it is a dominant source in today's culture. According to the 2009 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics- American Time Use Survey (ATUS), which measures how the average American spends their time, discovered that Americans 15 years-old and above spent 2.8 hours per day watching television. In 2009, A.C. Nielsen Company reported that 99% of all households owned at least 1 television and 66% of U.S. homes owned 3 or more televisions. Data also revealed that 79% of Americans believed that television violence aided to increase societal violence. For that matter, the content that is projected through the medium of television is crucial, due to the fact that the television is the central focus of many households.

The portrayal of stereotypes concerning African Americans in the media is most often tied to the cultivation theory developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross (1976). According to the theory, individuals who frequently watch high contents of television will begin to believe that they are living in a world similar to what is portrayed on the screen (Fujioka, 1999; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Therefore, a person who watches numerous shows will believe that he/she is living in a world more dangerous than it

actually is, large in part because their sense of crime becomes heightened (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Nonetheless, the media portrays African Americans acting out and behaving in unflattering ways; thus, these stereotypes can become even more believable and allow members of other racial groups to see these characteristics as definite actions of African American people (Berg, 1990; Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, Huang, 2000).

Background

During the 1940s and 1950s, African Americans had few roles, but when they were offered parts it consisted of stereotypical portrayals of characters being lazy, simple, or holding domestic servant roles such as television shows *Beulah* and *Amos 'n Andy* depicted (Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, Huang, 2000). By 1955, African Americans were portrayed in roles where nearly 49% of the characters were seen as not having a high school diploma, and 47% were viewed as having low economic status (Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, Huang, 2000). Even in the 1960s, African Americans still received stereotypical roles that were created in order to amuse White viewers (Atkin, 1992; Cummings, 1988).

As the Civil Rights Movement went underway, it became clear that minority characters were not being represented fairly on television (Rada, 2001; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977). On further examination, alleged discriminatory hiring practices were taking place at many television networks, explaining why African Americans were not being shown. Findings later revealed that the portrayal of minorities on television was “infrequent and stereotypical” (Mastro, 2000). It was then noted that those portrayals played a large role in shaping the negative perception Whites acquired for minorities (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977). Fortunately enough, after the civil rights movement, African Americans began getting more roles that didn’t always depict them negatively as television shows *The Mod Squad* and *Julia* illustrated (Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, Huang, 2000). However, although African Americans were receiving more notable roles (Gunter, 1998), findings suggest that stereotypical portrayals were still featured (Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, and Huang 2000). Nonetheless, African Americans on television became more noticeable in later years.

In 1971, African Americans represented 6% of characters in television comedies and dramas and made up 11% of the actual population, which was a drastic disparity in relation to the 89% that Whites accounted for on television (Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, Huang, 2000). By 1980, African Americans depicted 8% of characters and represented 12% of the population. Nevertheless, change certainly came by 1993 as African American characters represented 11% of characters on television and made up 12% of the population. Researchers noted that African American actors represented 13% of law enforcement/court officials, and 11% of all criminals (Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, and Huang, 2000). Hence, African Americans had crossed a milestone (Greenberg and Brand, 1994).

Crime Drama: Law and Order

Television crime dramas are a blend between both reality and fictional television. Hence, crime dramas are usually similar to real life occurrences and often rely on real life situations for its plot. Nonetheless, crime dramas often depict most African American and

Hispanic characters as criminals or victims of police brutality and White characters as police officials (Oliver, 1996). Therefore, it is no wonder why these depictions of racial groups in television programs seem to strengthen negative perceptions of minorities through the eyes of its viewers.

Law and Order premiered on September 13, 1990 and its last episode aired on May 24, 2010 spanning its 20 year television series. The show will be used to analyze the change over time within the portrayal of African American characters in televised programming and whether stereotyping was still present on the show. *Law and Order* was used for analysis not only because of its long span on prime time television, but because of its strong viewership record. The earliest record of the show is from 1993-1994; during those years the show averaged 9.6 million viewers per episode. Peak viewership occurred in 2001-2002 with an average of 18.7 million viewers per episode. In the shows final year 2009-2010, an average of 7.2 million viewers tuned in each episode. Hence, television crime dramas continue to be one of the most watched and enjoyed genres on television.

Crime dramas also seem to pull a larger fan base than that of traditional television news programming (TV Dimensions, 2003). Consequently, research has shown that concerns over the portrayals of violence in crime dramas have continued to spark the interests of authors since the early 1970s (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox & Signorielli, 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorelli, 1980). However, although many researchers use the cultivation theory to explain the problems within television programming, more research needs to be done, specifically on crime dramas to examine the nature of violence, as well as stereotypical racial portrayals, and the repercussions that they can have on its audiences (Holbrook & Hill, 2005). Therefore, based on findings of previous researchers, the specific area of this research is to examine the portrayal of African Americans on the crime drama *Law and Order* and to determine if there has been any change over the last two decades regarding the portrayal of African Americans on television, and perhaps if there is change, whether it will help to lessen or perpetuate racial stereotypes in the media.

Methods

In order to study possible change over time within the media, a study was constructed over a nine-week period to analyze the portrayal of African Americans in episodes of the television crime drama *Law and Order*. The sample of study included seasons 1 and 20 to examine the variance amongst the first and last seasons of the program. Episodes were chosen through random selection, and were conducted using a random number table. The entire sample included 10 episodes from each season, with a combined 20 episodes to be analyzed. Each episode was 45 minutes long, totaling 15 hours of viewing.

The units of analysis in the study were: (1) 20 random selected episodes of season 1 and 20, (2) all characters, taking a specific look at non- reoccurring or regular characters that portray criminal involvement, (3) race of characters and the role they play, as well as (4) specific stereotypical portrayals of African American characters. A code sheet was developed to examine selected variables to be measured. Variables included mutually-exclusive and non-exclusive variables. Variables consisted of the following: race (physical heritable trait that determines the color of a person's skin), role

(specific characterization interpreted by actor), appearance (visual look of character), behavior (actions and response to actions from other characters), language/speech (vocal communication of character), verbal aggression (vocal speech used to cause harm or pain to another character), physical aggression (use of body to cause harm or pain to another character), crime committed (violent act carried out to cause harm or pain), domestic crime (violent act carried out to cause harm or pain to a family member), indicator of guilt (any presence or sign that character is involved or connected to offense), verdict (final decision of character's guilt or innocence), repeat character (the amount of time character appears), and role importance (significance or influence of character).

Race was coded as three variables: Black (African American descent or character has black skin), White (Caucasian, of European descent or character has white skin), other (applies to any character that is not Black or White). Note that this study did not pay specific attention to the "other" category. However, it was still coded and used for analysis in the study.

Role was coded as: suspect (character suspected of offense), police (character that maintains order, character is a state/federal law enforcement agent), attorney (character is a legal defense or prosecuting agent), judge (character is an appointed public officer that decides upon trial/case), witness (character gives testimony or evidence of crime), victim (character faces harm or injury), other (any character not previously noted).

Appearance was coded as: poorly dressed (character is not dressed in appropriate clothing for role, occupation, or occasion that they are seen in), well groomed (character appears to maintain good hygiene; character is neat, shaven, or clean cut), not well groomed (character does not appear to maintain good hygiene; character is not neat, shaven, or clean cut), baggy/sagging clothes (character's clothes are loose and does not fit to body), dirty clothes (character's clothes appear unwashed, is stained, or has marks), ripped clothes (character's clothes are tattered).

Behavior was coded as: inappropriate in business settings (character is not respectful in formal settings; character maintains opposite behavior of his or her environment), behaves obnoxiously (character draws attention to his or herself by behaving in an annoying, offensive, or stubborn manner), is angry and or demanding (character is resentful or spiteful; character is authoritative and requires urgency; character appears in an unpleasant mood), is controlling (character is dominant in observed situation and does not care about the feelings and needs of other characters), is emotional (character appears to be crying, or expressing any form of deep emotion [e.g., character has a tantrum]), is disrespectful to others (character is impolite; character mistreats others and does not seem to care about their feelings).

Speech was coded as: speaks clearly (character is easy to understand and speaks in clear American English), hard to understand (character is not easy to understand and does not speak in clear American English), speaks in African American dialect (character speaks in Black English vernacular (BEV); character speaks in African American broken English, often called "Ebonics"), speaks with an accent (character speaks in an accent from a different country of origin; character pronounces and/or speaks with unfamiliar emphasis on syllables), speaks loudly (character appears to naturally speak louder than others), speaks shyly (character is timid when speaking; character's voice is low and quiet), speaks in a joking way (character does not appear serious when he or she speaks;

character continues to joke during a serious situation), has a speech impediment (character suffers from a speech defect; character is hindered from speaking correctly).

Verbal Aggression was coded as: yells often (character is often seen yelling or screaming; character rarely speaks in a decent tone; character's voice is above others), speaks sarcastically (character mocks others when speaking; character is not sincere), uses derogatory language (character insults others; character curses), belittles others when talking (character hurts others when he or she is talking; character is negative to others), often interrupts others when talking (character talks over others; character does not wait until others are finished talking to begin).

Physical Aggression was coded as: reacts to aggression (character quickly reacts to aggression in a negative manner), carries weapon (character is seen with a weapon; character threatens others with weapon; character uses weapon against others), is seen fighting (character is seen fighting, punching, kicking or applying any form of bodily force upon others), willingly attacks others (character gets a rush out of attacking others; character's temper is easily provoked and they seek to hurt or harm others).

Crime Committed was coded as: Arson (character commits crime involving fire; character burns building or property), assault (character causes bodily harm to others), drug (character is seen using, selling, buying, or in possession of drugs), murder (character kills another, with or without intent to kill), rape (character sexually abuses others), theft (character steals from others), other (any crime that is not previously noted).

Domestic Crime was coded as: (Yes/No) as well as *Indicator of Guilt* which was coded as: (Yes/No). If the character committed a domestic crime it was coded as yes, if the character did not commit a domestic crime it was coded as no. If there was any indication of guilt the character would be coded as yes. If there was no indication of guilt the character would be coded as no.

Verdict was coded as: guilty (character is proven responsible for crime), not guilty (character is proven innocent for crime; character is not responsible for crime), or other (character is not proven guilty or innocent for crime). Note that if character is seen committing a crime they were coded as guilty. Also, if character is arrested, seen in jail or in custody they were coded as guilty. This also applied if viewer did not see a trial or a verdict of guilt at the end of the show.

Role Importance was coded as: major (character's role is essential in episode; the episode is structured around the character), or minor (character's role is not essential or structured around the character).

Repeat Character was coded as: (Yes/No) and was determined depending on how many times the character was seen throughout the 10 episodes for each season. Characters that were continually present in all episodes were coded as *Yes* for repeat characters. Characters that only appeared as guest stars or were featured in less than 2 episodes were coded as *No* for repeat character.

Season 1 episodes were viewed from a 6-disc DVD set and were analyzed on a computer monitor. Season 20 episodes were watched and examined on a computer monitor via an online website where the episodes were purchased. Each episode was analyzed and coded while being watched. Each character that appeared on the show was coded. Note that characters seen in the background were not coded. However, characters that did not have a speaking role but were clearly noticeable to the viewer and were significant to the episode were coded. Once all episodes were watched and coded, they

were watched a second time and codes were checked for accuracy. The total time for coding and watching all episodes more than once was approximately 50 hours, and 345 characters were coded.

In order to analyze the results of the study, variables coded in the episodes were entered into statistical analysis software (SPSS) for assessment. Character's *race* was always used as the independent variable (IV). All other variables to be measured were selected as the dependent variable (DV). The control variables were the seasons (season 1 and season 20) in order to illustrate change over time. To test the hypotheses, the independent variable (IV), and dependent variable (DV), descriptive statistics and cross tabulations were used to show relationships between the independent and dependent variables in season 1 and season 20.

Results

From the sample, 345 characters were examined. The focus of this study is on the difference between how Whites and African-Americans are portrayed. Although the "other" race was analyzed it was not a specific focus of the study and will not be fully discussed within the results. Findings from the study show that 71.3% of characters were White (n= 246), 20% of characters were African American (n= 69) and 8.7% of characters were depicted as other (n= 30).

Race

Results for season 1 show that 58.9% of characters were White (n= 145), 39.1% of characters were African American (n= 27) and 46.7% of characters were represented as other (n= 14). Results from season 20 found that 41.1% of characters were White (n=101), 60.9% of characters were African American (n=42) and 53.3% of characters were depicted as other (n= 16).

Role

As seen in Table 1, White actors are shown more often and receive more roles than their African American counterparts. Cross tabulations for season 1, revealed a statistically significant relationship between race and the character's role. Although that relationship refers only to the overall pattern of results, a few of the roles are obviously responsible for the statistical results. The table shows that 90.9% of police officers were depicted as White, whereas only 6.1% of police were represented as African American. This 6.1% is much smaller than the overall 14.6% of roles that were played by African Americans. Attention should also be paid to the role of attorney in season 1, as African Americans accounted for 27.8% of all the attorneys portrayed; a number much higher than their overall representation across all roles. The percentages of African Americans were higher in victim and "other" roles and lower on judge and witness roles than would be expected. In the suspect role the percentage of African Americans was very close to their overall representation across roles.

Table 1: Season 1 Role Portrayal by Race

		Character Race			Total
		White	Black	Other	
Character Role	Suspect	13	3	3	19
		68.4%	15.8%	15.8%	100.0%
	Police	30	2	1	33
		90.9%	6.1%	3.0%	100.0%
	Attorney	13	5	0	18
		72.2%	27.8%	.0%	100.0%
	Judge	11	1	0	12
		91.7%	8.3%	.0%	100.0%
	Witness	42	5	6	53
		79.2%	9.4%	11.3%	100.0%
	Victim	2	2	0	4
		50.0%	50.0%	.0%	100.0%
	Other	33	9	4	46
		71.7%	19.6%	8.7%	100.0%
Total		144	27	14	185
		77.8%	14.6%	7.6%	100.0%

For season 20, characters portraying the role as police revealed a substantial change in its portrayal. As shown in Table 1 and 2, from season 1 to season 20 African American characters depicting police officers increased from 6.1% of all police officers to 50% of all police officers by season 20, even higher than the percentage of Whites. This is a dramatic change across the 20 years. However the percentage of attorneys who were African American decreased from season 1 to season 20. The percent of African American suspects are also lower than expected.

Table 2: Season 20 Role Portrayal by Race

		Race Character Race			Total
		White	Black	Other	
Character Role	Suspect	13	4	4	21
		61.9%	19.0%	19.0%	100.0%
	Police	15	17	2	34
		44.1%	50.0%	5.9%	100.0%
	Attorney	10	1	0	11
		90.9%	9.1%	.0%	100.0%
	Judge	2	0	0	2
		100.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%

	Witness	21	6	1	28
		75.0%	21.4%	3.6%	100.0%
	Victim	7	1	2	10
		70.0%	10.0%	20.0%	100.0%
	Other	33	13	7	53
		62.3%	24.5%	13.2%	100.0%
Total		101	42	16	159
		63.5%	26.4%	10.1%	100.0%

Appearance

Results for season 1 depicted statistical significance based on the results of the Pearson Chi-Square tests. White characters were only represented 3.4% as appearing poorly, however African American characters were shown 37%, a number not representative to the total amount of characters in season 1, as shown in Table 3. Season 20 showed noticeably different results as White's are seen appearing poorly 13.9% and African Americans only 4.8%, a number much lower than the portrayal shown in season 1.

Table 3: Season 1 Poor Appearance

			Poor Appearance		Total
			.00	1.00	
Character Race	.00 White	Count	140	5	145
		% within Race Character Race	96.6%	3.4%	100.0%
	1.00 Black	Count	17	10	27
		% within Race Character Race	63.0%	37.0%	100.0%
	2.00 Other	Count	11	3	14
		% within Race Character Race	78.6%	21.4%	100.0%
Total		Count	168	18	186
		% within Race Character Race	90.3%	9.7%	100.0%

Largely, season 20 shows more of an actual representation of both characters based on the percent of characters in each race. Season 20, does not show African American characters as being severely poorly dressed but shows that it is only a small

percentage of the amount of characters. Thus, these results show that, in terms of appearance, the portrayal of African-Americans has improved considerably across 20 years.

Table 4: Season 20 Poor Appearance

			Poor Appearance		Total
			.00	1.00	
Character Race	.00 White	Count	87	14	101
		% within Race Character Race	86.1%	13.9%	100.0%
	1.00 Black	Count	40	2	42
		% within Race Character Race	95.2%	4.8%	100.0%
	2.00 Other	Count	14	2	16
		% within Race Character Race	87.5%	12.5%	100.0%
Total		Count	141	18	159
		% within Race Character Race	88.7%	11.3%	100.0%

Speech

Season 1 data revealed significant results in speech differences between both races. African American characters were viewed 66.7% of the time speaking in Black English vernacular (BEV), in an accent, or broken English, whereas only 25.5% of Whites were portrayed speaking unclearly, as shown in Table 5. Based on the Pearson-Chi square, the results were proven to be significant.

Table 5: Season 1 Speech Unclear

			Speech Unclear		Total
			.00	1.00	
Character Race	.00 White	Count	108	37	145
		% within Race Character Race	74.5%	25.5%	100.0%
	1.00 Black	Count	9	18	27

		% within Race Character Race	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%
	2.00 Other	Count	8	6	14
		% within Race Character Race	57.1%	42.9%	100.0%
Total	Count		125	61	186
	% within Race Character Race		67.2%	32.8%	100.0%

Season 20 did not reveal any significant difference in speech, as shown in Table 6. However, it does depict that the portrayal of African Americans is more reflective of the population. Although in both seasons, African Americans were observed having more difficulty speaking than Whites, by season 20 the percentages for Whites and African-Americans were more similar.

Table 6: Season 20 Speech Unclear

			Speech Unclear		Total
			.00	1.00	
Character Race	.00 White	Count	88	13	101
		% within Race Character Race	87.1%	12.9%	100.0%
	1.00 Black	Count	30	12	42
		% within Race Character Race	71.4%	28.6%	100.0%
	2.00 Other	Count	12	4	16
		% within Race Character Race	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	130	29	159
		% within Race Character Race	81.8%	18.2%	100.0%

Negative Behavior

Analysis of negative behavior for both seasons revealed that the numbers were very much alike and almost indistinguishable. From 345 characters in both seasons, 23.2% of White characters were shown behaving inappropriately and 26.7% of African Americans. Figures shown in Table 7 and 8 show that the difference between Whites and African Americans exhibiting negative behavior decreased between Season 1 and Season 20.

Table 7: Season 1 Negative Behavior

			Negative Behavior		Total
			.00	1.00	
Character Race	.00 White	Count	113	32	145
		% within Race Character Race	77.9%	22.1%	100.0%
	1.00 Black	Count	19	8	27
		% within Race Character Race	70.4%	29.6%	100.0%
	2.00 Other	Count	11	3	14
		% within Race Character Race	78.6%	21.4%	100.0%
Total		Count	143	43	186
		% within Race Character Race	76.9%	23.1%	100.0%

Table 8: Season 20 Negative Behavior

			Negative Behavior		Total
			.00	1.00	
Character Race	.00 White	Count	76	25	101
		% within Race Character Race	75.2%	24.8%	100.0%
	1.00 Black	Count	32	10	42
		% within Race Character Race	76.2%	23.8%	100.0%
	2.00 Other	Count	11	5	16
		% within Race Character Race	68.8%	31.3%	100.0%
Total		Count	119	40	159
		% within Race Character Race	74.8%	25.2%	100.0%

Verbal Aggression

Table 9: Season 1 Verbal Aggression

			Verbal Aggression			Total
			.00	1.00	10.00	
Character Race	.00 White	Count	107	37	1	145
		% within Race Character Race	73.8%	25.5%	.7%	100.0%
	1.00 Black	Count	21	6	0	27
		% within Race Character Race	77.8%	22.2%	.0%	100.0%
	2.00 Other	Count	11	3	0	14
		% within Race Character Race	78.6%	21.4%	.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	139	46	1	186
		% within Race Character Race	74.7%	24.7%	.5%	100.0%

For season 1, verbal aggression, the results revealed similar findings between the races as seen in Table 9. White characters observed to be verbally aggressive was 25.5% and African American characters were 22.2%. These numbers are not extreme in comparison to each other and illustrates that neither group is seen as overly aggressive. However, although the findings within the races are close in proximity White characters lead approximately 3% more than African Americans as being verbally aggressive. Findings for season 20, verbal aggression revealed that 16.8% of White characters were seen as verbally aggressive and 9.5% of characters were observed as being verbally aggressive. Based on the results, Whites exceed African Americans as being more verbally aggressive by nearly 7%. However, although there is a clear majority the numbers are still too small to make any clear observation as shown in Table 10. Also note, for both seasons 1 and 20, separate variables for verbal aggression including yells often, speaks sarcastically and uses derogatory language were combined into one category *Verbal Aggression*, for better analysis of the data. All variables were dichotomous (1= Yes, 0= No)

Table 10: Season 20 Verbal Aggression

			Verbal Aggression		Total
			.00	1.00	
Character Race	.00 White	Count	84	17	101

		% within Race Character Race	83.2%	16.8%	100.0%
	1.00 Black	Count	38	4	42
		% within Race Character Race	90.5%	9.5%	100.0%
	2.00 Other	Count	16	0	16
		% within Race Character Race	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
Total	Count		138	21	159
	% within Race Character Race		86.8%	13.2%	100.0%

Physical Aggression

Table 11: Season 1 Physical Aggression

			Physical Aggression		Total
			.00	1.00	
Character Race	.00 White	Count	138	7	145
		% within Race Character Race	95.2%	4.8%	100.0%
	1.00 Black	Count	24	3	27
		% within Race Character Race	88.9%	11.1%	100.0%
	2.00 Other	Count	14	0	14
		% within Race Character Race	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	176	10	186
		% within Race Character Race	94.6%	5.4%	100.0%

For season 1, physical aggression data shows that only a small percentage of characters were seen as physically aggressive. However, African American characters were seen as more physically aggressive with an approximate 6% increase over White characters.

Table 12: Season 20 Physical Aggression

			Physical Aggression		Total
			.00	1.00	
Character Race	.00 White	Count	97	4	101

		% within Race Character Race	96.0%	4.0%	100.0%
	1.00 Black	Count	42	0	42
		% within Race Character Race	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
	2.00 Other	Count	16	0	16
		% within Race Character Race	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	155	4	159
		% within Race Character Race	97.5%	2.5%	100.0%

Data for season 20, physical aggression reveal that 4% of White characters were seen as physically aggressive. African Americans were not shown as physically aggressive. Although the results determine that White characters exceed African Americans in physical aggression, there is not enough data to fully determine a conclusion. Also note, for both seasons 1 and 20, separate variables for physical aggression including reacts to aggression, is seen fighting, and carries weapon were combined into one category *Physical Aggression*, for better analysis of the data. All variables were dichotomous (1= Yes, 0= No)

Crime Committed

In season 1 Whites were portrayed as murderers 2.8% (n= 4) and African Americans were not seen committing any murders. Whites were viewed as rapists 2.8% (n= 4) and African Americans were not portrayed as rapists. Data for season 20 show that 4% of Whites committed murders (n= 4) and 4.8% of African Americans committed murders (n= 2). Crime labeled as other was committed 1% for White characters (n= 1) and African Americans were not portrayed as committing crimes labeled other. It is important to note that all other crimes were not portrayed as being committed in either season 1 or 20. Only murder, rape, and other crimes were shown. For crime committed, African American characters were portrayed as a murderer 4.8% which is still higher than its counterpart with 4%. However, in all other areas of crime African Americans data shows that they were not portrayed as committing any other crime.

Domestic Crime

The numbers of domestic crimes were too small to be able to interpret the data in a meaningful way.

Indicator of Guilt

Data for season 1 show that 7.6% of White characters were viewed with an indication of guilt and 7.4% of African Americans were represented with an indication of guilt. Data for season 20 shows that 15% of White characters indicated that they were guilty (n= 15) and 7.1% of African Americans indicated guilt (n= 3). It is important to

note that these characters were all seen as suspects. All other characters played different roles which eliminates them from these results.

Verdict

Data of season 1 show that Whites were viewed as not guilty 50% (n=6), guilty 33.3% (n= 4), and other as 16.7% (n= 2). African Americans were seen as not guilty 100% (n= 2). African Americans were not seen as guilty or other. In season 20 Whites were portrayed as not guilty 12.5% (n= 1), guilty 37. 5% (n= 3), and other 50% (n= 4). African Americans were represented as guilty 100% (n= 2). African Americans were not viewed as not guilty or other. These numbers are too small to be able to interpret in a meaningful way.

Role Importance

Results for season 1 show that 18.6 % of the roles played by Whites were major roles (n= 27), and 14.8% of the roles played by African Americans were major roles (n= 4). Season 20 shows that 28% of White characters played major roles (n= 28) and 45.2% of African American characters played major roles (n= 19). It is important to note that characters listed as playing major roles were the characters the episode mainly focused on, which excludes background characters from the data. Also note that this finding was used to examine the difference between the racial groups, therefore attention should be paid to the differences between the racial groups and the significance of their playing a major role.

Repeat Character

Season 1 data revealed that 8.3% of White characters were repeat characters (n =12) and 14.8% of African Americans (n=4). Season 20 shows that 23% of white characters were repeat characters (n= 23) and 35.7% of African Americans (n= 15). It is important to note that repeat characters only include characters that were featured in more than 2 episodes. All other characters were viewed as guest appearing characters.

Discussion

Based on the results of the study it is evident that there has been a significant change over time within the crime drama *Law and Order*. Throughout the data it is visible that during the first season of the show there were large disparities that reflected negatively on African Americans. However, by the 20th season one can see that gradual change has taken place. In later episodes in the last season it is almost unrecognizable that the same race of characters during season 1 are now in season 20 represented with squeaky clean images. However, although these new portrayals are more favorable on African American people they still reveal disparities because the results are frighteningly unreal.

Results from season 20 also revealed an attempt for African American and White characters to be seen as similar in regards to criminal actions and behavior, as shown in Table 7. This portrayal does not place any full emphasize on one group, nor does it separate the races as good or bad. Instead, they stand in relatively the same place, which are often times not seen. Hence, this is very significant.

However, although these results do show a significant amount of change from the first season to the last, what does the change mean? And why did it change so drastically? Especially because the portrayal of African American characters in season 1 was dreadfully stereotypical. Hence, although African Americans were no longer seen as just criminals in season 20, television shows especially shows such as *Law and Order* which often make an emphasis on being similar to real life representations should also depict similar portrayals to the actual population and crime statistics that occur rather than portraying false realities on both extremes, as shown with both season 1 and 20.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, African Americans made up 12.1% of the population and Whites made up 80.3% in the 1990 data report. The projected population for 2010 U.S. population based on the U.S. Census Bureau lists that Whites make up 79.70% and African Americans account for 12.86%. In 1995, the Uniform Crime Reports revealed that African Americans represented 30.9% of arrests for crime and Whites represented 66.8% of the arrests. For violent crime, which is noted in the (UCR) as offenses of murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, 43.7% of those arrested were African American and 54.3% of those arrested were White. For property crime, which is noted in the (UCR) as crimes of burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson 32.6% of those arrested were African Americans and 64.7% of those arrested were Whites. In 2008, the Uniform Crime Report shows that of all arrests 28.3% were African Americans and 69.2% were White for violent crime arrests in 2008, 39.4% were African American and 58.3% were White. For property crime arrests, 30.1% were African American and 67.4% were White.

Based on these figures the depictions made in both season 1 and 20 were not representative to the actual population and crime that occurred. Nevertheless we see that the media does highly exaggerate whether for good or bad purposes; however, television shows such as *Law and Order* and other crime dramas should not be used as an example or be viewed to measure real life. Thus, for those who watch large quantities of television it is no surprise that they are more fearful of the world around them. Not to mention, if the viewer is unaware of the racial disparities found in television media and believe what they see, as the cultivation theory suggests.

Researchers note that the media draws stereotypes deeper into our cognitive minds which force us to always think about race. For that matter, if people are not taught to pay attention to race and stereotypes it would not be as important in our culture because we would not have a preexisting schema to draw from (Bargh, Lombardi, & Higgins, 1988; Higgins & Brendl, 1995). Thus, if something is not relevant in society it is no longer viewed as important and can no longer harm others. Therefore, why should it not be assumed that if the media did not overly exaggerate the portrayals of characters on television then stereotypes could be erased? Unfortunately, because stereotypes extend so far back. Hence, every time a television show, commercial, or a magazine feeds into these negative portrayals it only takes the entire race another step backwards because those messages only continue to form and strengthen, consequently reproducing racism (Gandy, 1994).

According to researchers, after doing several public opinion polls they found that most Whites felt more fearful of crime when around African Americans or in the assumed presence of African Americans (Moeller, 1989; St. John & Herald-Moore, 1995; Oliver, 2003). It is not strange that African Americans are looked upon as criminals or

suspected of being dangerous because that is the portrayal that they often get in the media. However, what is truly strange is that the majority of Whites who were polled felt fearful. Thus, will stereotypes truly leave our culture since it is so engrained in us that even the thought of being near an African American person leaves others in fear?

An examiner states that it isn't surprising that stereotypes have continued to develop, mainly because most people get their information from the media. Hence, based on the media's portrayal of crime and the portrayal of African Americans, it only "creates and sustains" preconceived notions of African Americans (Oliver, 2003).

The findings of the study were not largely consistent with the literature, mainly because many of the stereotypes that were heightened in season 1 depicting African American characters were no longer observed, or were not seen often enough to analyze by season 20. However, the literature does help to describe that with less negative representation of minorities in the media it can lead to a better society. As stated by the researchers, it is simply because our culture would have less negative portrayals of minorities which would help to limit the effect of stereotypes that have been embedded in our culture; and thus, because there would be different depictions of minority people that go against what individuals know to be true. Consequently, with less negative portrayals to generalize and stereotype an individual solely based on their skin complexion the act can become less commonplace.

Thus, season 20 results show that there was a significant change in which African Americans were less likely to be seen in a negative light. Thus, this drastic change can lead to future positive changes in our culture concerning racial issues.