

THE PORTRAYAL OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN SITUATION COMEDIES

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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While one might ordinarily hypothesize that the portrayal of African Americans on television has positively progressed over the years, this study sets out to determine the extent to which the depiction of African Americans has changed. Stereotypical key terms are evaluated and calculated throughout several African-American television programs that were aired before and after *The Cosby Show* run from 1984 to 1992. This study attempts to examine this phenomenon by determining which attributes were, and are currently, portrayed, along with the frequency of those portrayals. Results of this study showed a slight increase in negative portrayals since the airing of *The Cosby Show*, and therefore, lead to speculation as to whether there may be a more accurate way to determine additional and more precise findings.

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Introduction

Since its advent, television has served as a persuasive medium throughout the United States and well beyond our borders. For many decades, there have been serious concerns raised by African Americans about how they are portrayed by the media (Isaacs, 2010; Horton, 1999; Balkaran, 1999). Isaacs's (2010) longitudinal study, over a period of 20 years, found that television migrated from depicting African Americans as dramatically unfavorable in the 1990s, to exaggeratedly favorable in 2010. Balkaran (1999) maintains that there are profits to be gained from portraying race as it has been and is currently defined, and this portrayal outweighs the need to change what has proven to be a valuable business approach. However, in contrast, Horton (1999) indicates that although there has been social progress in general, the portrayal of African Americans in movies, television, and the news has not significantly changed in a positive way.

The negative portrayal of African Americans in the media is not new, nor is it limited only to television; the stereotypical portrayal dates back several decades. For instance, Carl Pierson's 1935 Western with Gene Autry portrayed African Americans negatively in *The Singing Vagabond*. In this movie, Gene Autry, his sidekick Smiley Burnett, Ann Rutherford, and Barbara Peppe used unnamed African American dancers whose *sole* role throughout the movie was to perform a silly dance while grinning, which made them look like buffoons. The dancers were not included in the list of credits, although Champion, Gene Autry's horse, was listed as a cast member.

This treatment is what a very prolific black lyricist of 20th century, Andy Razaf's, 1940 poem below questions. The poem supports the general feeling that the U.S. media do not portray African Americans in a good light:

Are Hollywood producers mindful of their harmful acts
Or are they just plain ignorant and do not know the facts
Don't they know colored people are just like other folks?

Razaf's lines express African Americans' frustration over their portrayal in the media back to the silent movie period.

Horton's position (1999) is very much supported by Leab (1973), who also suggests that the portrayal of African Americans in the U.S. Media has not changed over time. Leab (1973) indicates that the portrayal of African Americans generally makes them appear to look and to feel like "objects of ridicule and condescension" (p.1).

According to Leab (1973), movies such as *Sambo*, *Rastus in Zululand*, and *Nothing But a Man* portray African Americans as lazy, uneducated, unethical, brutish, and poor. Much of the literature suggests that attitudes and portrayals have not significantly changed over the years (Stroman, Merritt, & Matabane, 1989). Although the number of African Americans who appear in television shows has increased, the quality of the portrayal has not improved (Masto & Tropp, 2004).

Furthermore, Stroman, Merritt, and Matabane (1989) propose that the actual socio-economic condition of African Americans *before* the Kerner Commission, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders established by President Lyndon. B. Johnson, was better than their portrayal in the media. The Kerner Commission authors stated:

We find African American characters are looking better, talking better, and not acting like buffoons, but they are restricted to what they might tell us about the issues in the lives of African Americans. (p. 53)

In 1994, Dates suggested that the coverage of African Americans in the media had celebrated misogyny and violence, and communicated paranoid images of black men as shucking and jiving con artists who joke about pathological behaviors and criminality while playing the role of black “bucks” to whites (1994, Dates). One would expect that the portrayal of African Americans in the media would have changed in more recent years, as evidenced by the election of the first African-American President, Barack Obama, and the extraordinary progress that can be seen throughout the black community. This is also clearly evident by the fame and success of Oprah, who has been recognized by Forbes magazine in 2014 as *the* richest African-American person in the world; two African American Secretaries of State, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice; and the current National Security Advisor, Susan Rice, among others. But what has actually changed in the media, and the way they have chosen to define African Americans today?

Situation comedies provide a particularly interesting view of this definition. The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which situation comedies have portrayed African Americans since the advent of television, and to attempt to determine the extent to which there has been a positive change in these portrayals on TV over the past 50 years. Because of the profound impact of *The Cosby Show* on society, this particular TV show is used as the supposed “turning-point” in the study.

Relevance

The Cosby Show served as a benchmark in American television because of its vast popularity with viewers, and the light-hearted positive portrayals of African-American characters. The show was ranked as the most popular family comedy in the 1980s (Britannica, 2015). As the highlight of Thursday-night television for eight whole seasons, from 1984 to 1992, the program was recognized for reviving the sitcom genre and increasing the network's ratings (Britannica, 2015). The show was well-known and valued for its attempt to battle stereotypes about African- American families. The Huxtables' high-income professions, strong nuclear family, and mixed-racial peer group was the basis for *TV Guide* deeming them "the most atypical black family in television history" (Britannica, 2015).

The Cosby Show was one of only two American television shows to lead the Nielsen ratings for five successive seasons. It received the People's Choice Award for favorite comedy program for seven years of its eight year run, as well as three Golden Globes; six of the 29 Emmy Awards for which it was nominated; and more than 40 other awards (Britannica, 2015). "The finale of *The Cosby Show* was the seventh most-watched of all time, with 44.4 million viewers" (Fisher, 2014). Accolades of this measure are substantial in African American TV. Therefore, it is normal to assume that the evidence of its popularity would change television production forever.

Fisher (2014) describes how *The Cosby Show* played a significant role in frequently promoting African Americans and African culture by working other artists into story lines. For instance, Jacob Lawrence, Miles Davis, B.B. King, Stevie Wonder, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Miriam Makeba were featured on the program. The show opened

doors to other successful sitcoms featuring African-American casts, including *227*, *Amen* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Furthermore, *A Different World* was a spin-off from *The Cosby Show*, which was created after the character Denise, played by Lisa Bonet, left home to attend Hillman College, a fictional historically black college (Fisher, 2014).

Research Questions

The study will seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the dominant attributes of African Americans portrayed in situation comedies pre- and post- *The Cosby Show*?
2. Is the overall frequency of portrayals of African American stereotypical attributes pre- and post- *The Cosby Show* different?

Methodology

The instrument discussed in this study focused on episodes of the shows listed below, as studies have found these shows to reveal a high degree of reliability.

I investigated four situation comedies in order to determine the extent to which the portrayal of African Americans in situation comedies has changed with the shifting socio-economic and political changes in the U.S. over time. I examined two episodes of *Good Times* and *The Jefferson's* before *The Cosby Show*, and two episodes of *Family Matters* and *My Wife and Kids* after *The Cosby Show*. A synopsis of the situation comedies that form the study sample drawn over a period of time is presented below.

Good Times stars the unemployed wife and mother of three, Florida Evans. The husband's character is James Evans, a proud black man who usually works two jobs, one in construction and one dishwashing. The couple had three children: James, Jr., a seventeen-year old, Thelma, a sixteen-year old, and youngest Michael, an eleven-year old. The show also stars building superintendent, Nathan Bookman, known as Booger and Florida's best friend, Willona Woods, who is divorced and always stopping over the apartment. *Good Times* deals with the characters' challenges to "get by" in a high rise project building in Chicago.

The Jefferson's made its debut in 1975, focusing on a black household "coming up" in New York City. With a successful dry cleaning business, George Jefferson and his wife Louise found themselves surrounded by whites: they lived in a predominately white neighborhood, where they were both living and working with white people. George

repeatedly exhibited his dislike of those who were white. Their good friends and neighbors, Tom and Helen Willis, were a mixed-race couple; Tom was white and Helen was black. They were the highlight of the show's humor. George openly shared his racial views, and expressed his negative opinions about mixing races with those on the show: Tom and Helen, their daughter, and his own son. In an interesting twist, the Willis's daughter, dates and then marries the Jefferson's son, Lionel.

Family Matters ran for nine seasons and focused on Harriet Winslow, an elevator operator from the *Chicago Chronicle*, her husband Carl Winslow, and their three children: Eddie, Laura and Judy Winslow. The family members opened their home to Harriet's sister, Rachel Crawford, and her baby Richie. The show also featured Steve Urkel. Steve was intended to be a guest appearance, but became the main character due to his popularity as the world's favorite nerd. The show was on the ABC network from September, 1989 to September, 1997 and on the CBS network from September, 1997 through July, 1998.

In *My Wife and Kids*, Michael Kyle is a loving husband and modern-day patriarch who owns a trucking company that he established himself. He and his wife, Jay, rule their household with a unique and distinct parenting style. They teach their three children all about life's lessons with wisdom, discipline, and humor. Claire, the oldest daughter, is dating a religious boy, Tony. Kady, the youngest, feels threatened by the new baby's presence, but her family is there to help her get over her insecurities. Kady has a friendship with the young piano player, Franklin. Father Michael can only hope that his

parental advice, mixed with witty humor, will encourage his children to behave responsibly. Through it all, the children know their *father knows best*, and they can turn to him when they need his guidance and he will be there for them.

In order to choose the population of episodes, I numbered each of the sitcoms' shows from the pilot episode to the time of the last airing. For example, *Good Times* was numbered from episode 1 to episode 130; *Jeffersons* from episode 1 to episode 253; *Family Matters* from episode 1 to episode 215; and *My Wife and Kids* from episode 1 to episode 122.

Using the table of random numbers, I selected two episodes from each show for analysis. According to Fletcher and Bowers (1983), this is a reliable method of selecting shows when random numbers are used. "In conjunction with a numbers list of population members, an investigator can eliminate chance for bias to affect the research project," (Fletcher & Bowers, 1983, p. 76). During the numbering process, I discovered that three of the episodes of *Good Times* did not appear on the original network, but they appeared in the syndication package, and they were eliminated from the numbering and coding.

The Unit of Analysis

According to Ithiel de Sola Pool: The smallest segment of content counted and scored in content analysis is the coding unit. The most common coding units are a word; a theme, or assertion; paragraph; an item; a character group, object or institution; and space of time.

The unit analysis in this study will be an act or acts performed by the characters as interpreted by the definitions under Definition of Variables.

Procedure

The study used three peers to code an episode. One episode of one show was given to each coder to code the show based on the items defined under the Definition of Variables. I also coded the same episode, and cross examined the work to check for reliability in terms of inter-rater reliability and variable agreement.

This study examined two episodes of *Good Times* and *The Jefferson's* before *The Cosby Show*, and two episodes of *Family Matters* and *My Wife and Kids* after *The Cosby Show*. The study examined a total of eight episodes of these four African American sitcoms.

The study used a set of key terms that described “stereotypical” characteristics during the analysis section. Each episode’s portrayal of the terms was examined throughout the selected programs. This shed light on how viewers perceived, or were intended to have perceived the characters, their careers, family life, situations, relationships, and the show as a whole.

The study used item coding derived from categories used by the U.S. Riot Commission Report (1968), Seggar and Wheeler (1973), U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1977), Baptista-Fernandez (1980), Warren (1988), Stroman, Merrit, and Matabane, (1989-1990), Dates (1990), and Rada (2001). The categories will be refined and will be added to reflect what these scholars have already done. The list is not exhaustive, but has been refined and added to by the scholars and it includes: comical, crooked, insolent, bestial, ignorant, lazy, unethical, brutish, inferior, dumb, dishonest,

power hungry and money hungry. The definitions used to code the items follow the example of Ikpah, Shewchuk, Bavoso, Vallee and Poliero (2013), Volsky (2014), Marshall (2015), Stephenson (2014), Dixon (2000), Gines (2015), Decker (2015), and Barkley (2014).

Variable Definitions

Inferior

Inferior refers to someone who is lower in rank, social status, or quality (Oxford, 2015). Playing a role in a lower class would suggest that someone is not at all *well-to-do* or as well off as others. In job status, such an individual would be at the very bottom, a person who is not able to complete tasks as well as others. When used in regards to parenting, an inferior is a person who is not able to fully commit to that role. This is what Decker (2015) calls:

The belief that certain racial groups are inferior to others, accompanied and legitimized by historical inequity and unequal power dynamics. Racism is not only racial slurs, or housing discrimination or not hiring someone for a job because of their race. It's the perceptions held by the group in power and the actions that result from those perceptions. (p.1)

Lazy

The term lazy has been especially associated with African Americans, much due to the difficulty in obtaining jobs and careers while competing with white Americans. Thus, the involvement in the welfare system is in abundance, causing a continuing stereotype. Republican Mississippi state Rep. Gene Alday was quoted by a local paper saying that "all the blacks" in his district get "welfare crazy checks" because they do not work (Edwards, 2015).

Further, for coding purposes, I considered the classification of House Budget Chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI), and cited Charles Murray, a conservative social scientist who believes African-Americans are, as a population, less intelligent than whites due to genetic differences and that poverty remains a national problem because “a lot of poor people are born lazy” (Volsky, 2014).

Dumb

The word dumb refers to a person who is not educated, one who lacks common sense or is stupid (Oxford, 2015). Barkley (2015) talks about a fear of intelligence within the black community, one that would rather tear down a successful person than allow him or her to succeed, making the others in the community look bad.

Dishonest

Dishonest refers to any person who intends to mislead or cheat, and is untrustworthy in their actions and words (Oxford, 2015). Most dishonesty arises through lying, stealing, or unethical behavior. Whether it is deceit, manipulation, fraud, or cheating, common forms of deception are recognized through a lack of one’s moral standard (Heibutzki, 2015).

Comical

Comical is a characteristic that describes someone who is amusing, especially in a ludicrous or absurd way (Oxford, 2015). Critics have discussed comedic relief parts played by African American characters as being used to distract viewers from the severity of the problems that African Americans have to endure. “Hollywood has a track

record of using negative stereotypes of black characters for comic relief,” said Todd Boyd, a professor of popular culture at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. Boyd (2009) also stated that “There’s a history of people getting laughs at the expense of African-Americans and African-American culture.”

Unethical

The definition of unethical, as used in this study, was taken from a discussion about African-American Mayor of Washington DC, Marion Barry, in an Ethics article by Jack Marshall (2014) stating:

Ethics is good conduct as determined by the *values and customs of society*. Professions promulgate codes of ethics precisely because the law cannot proscribe all inappropriate or harmful behavior. Much that is unethical is not illegal. Lying, betrayal, nepotism and ethical conduct is self-motivated, based on the individual’s values and the internalized desire to do the right thing. (p.1)

In this paper, I considered the following behaviors or practices as unethical: people who participate in mischievous as well as criminal activity and engage in nefarious affairs. Instances of lying and deception are also included. However, participating in illegal drug trafficking, use or abuse, prostitution and abusing alcohol are considered unethical as well as illegal. Also, murder, assault, trespassing, any form of robbery, burglary, or theft are included as well.

Crooked

When using the term crooked, it is often that politicians and police officers come to mind; the news frequently depicts them as receiving bribes, stealing money, and brutalizing and/or threatening others. Many scholars, along with Felix Ortiz of the Wheatstone student magazine, discuss Denzel Washington's starring role in *Training Day* (2001) as a crooked cop who manipulates those around him to carry on the crime in the streets that he swore to fight with his rookie partner. This is a good example of how the term will be observed for the study.

Insolent

Insolence involves talking offensively or disrespectfully. Actions commonly associated with insolence include talking back, aggressively arguing, talking in a disrespectful manner and such body language as eye rolling and looking away (McCoy, 2014).

Bestial

This label comes up often throughout history, and is a word that describes those who act outside of human character; similar to animals, and are savagely cruel and depraved (Oxford, 2015). In 1900, Charles Carroll's *The Negro A Beast* claimed that blacks were more akin to apes than to human beings, and theorized that blacks had been the "tempters of Eve" (Pilgram, 2012). Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots*, a 1902 novel, claimed that emancipation had transformed blacks from a chattel to be bought and sold into a beast to be feared and guarded (Pilgram, 2012).

Brutish

Brutish refers to people seen to be rough and violent and/or those who participate in like behavior or acts. Also, they evidence an inability to control their tempers and exhibit an attitude of easily giving into basic needs such as sexual urges. This definition, proposed by Lemon (1977), found that blacks had more negatively dominant portrayals in situation comedies than whites, and that they were unfavorably portrayed in crime dramas. Blacks composed of roughly 36% of such major and minor interactions in situation comedies, and 7% of those in crime dramas. Lemon (1977) also reported that, “blacks were somewhat less likely to be of high status in crime dramas than whites. On these programs, African Americans were more likely to be portrayed as *brutish* (i.e., criminals) or as inept (i.e., not able to adapt to white society).”

Power hungry

In 2013, Matteredra’s article suggested that if a person is power hungry, his or her ultimate goal is to be in power, not to meet the needs of the people. Ethical values are generally traded for the possibility of a position with power. They are always looking for the next person who can do something to help them climb the social ladders in their spheres of influence which causes them to use people. Money is another important issue to them; however, they deem position and influence as more important than money because they believe in the long run more influence will bring in more money anyway (Matteredra, 2013).

Money hungry

This is a term for an individual who values money so much that s/he will overstep ethical boundaries in order to obtain it. Thomas (2009) states that:

Because countless numbers of African Americans have lived in poverty for generations, they have often unknowingly perhaps, desired to have wealth for wrong reasons. Desiring wealth for the wrong reasons or obtaining it in the wrong way will lead to negative consequences such as pride, false security, short-lived prosperity, over-indulgence, crime and a damaged reputation. (p1)

Ignorant

In this study, people who are considered to be ignorant include, but are not limited to, high school drop-outs, those with an inability to use proper grammar, those holding minimum wage jobs and unable to be promoted due to lack of education. According to NBA Hall-of-Famer, Charles Barkley, African Americans in American society are "brainwashed" to consider street smarts more important than education or professional success. According to Barkley (2014):

Uneducated blacks are brainwashed to believe that if you're not tough or rugged, *you are not black enough*. If you go to school, make good grades, speak intelligently, and don't break the law, you're not a good black person. It's a dirty, dark secret in the black community. (p.1)

Analysis

Research question number 1 asks what the dominant attributes of African Americans portrayed in situation comedies *are* pre- and post- *The Cosby Show*. The first analysis was of *The Jeffersons* — who were “moving on up, to the East Side, to a deluxe apartment in the sky,” on the air from 1975-1985 and were reported in Appendix I. Both women and men actors’ depictions were tallied in separate groupings. The highest five attributes that were tallied on women’s character-representation on the shows were: Inferior, Unethical, Lazy, Dishonest and Comical. The breakdown indicates that Inferior, with 15.3 percent, was most prevalent. Unethical follows second with 14.50 percent, Lazy attributes were third with 11.45 percent, Dishonest and Comical were ranked fourth and fifth, both calculated at 6.87 percent.

On the male section of *The Jeffersons*, the highest of the five attributes were Unethical, Power hungry, Money hungry, Inferior and Lazy. The breakdown shows Unethical, with 12.58, percent as number one, Power hungry as second with 12.58 percent, Money hungry as third place with 12.58 percent, Inferior with 11.92 percent and Lazy with 7.94 percent.

Considering the percentages of the top five attributes, the highest five attributes for both female and male are: Inferior with 15.3 percent, Unethical was second with 14.50 percent, Power hungry and Money hungry were third and fourth with 12.58 percent, and Lazy at 11.5 percent.

Appendix II shows the results of the computation of the attributes in *Good Times*. This show aired on the CBS Network from 1974 to 1979. The top five attributes depicted by the female actors were: Unethical, Power hungry, Money hungry, Dumb and Dishonest. The detailed breakdown indicates the five attributes as: Unethical, Power hungry and Money hungry all with 12.24 percent, followed by Dumb and Dishonest with 7.48 percent.

On the male actor portrayals, Unethical, Lazy, Crooked, Power hungry and Money hungry are the highest tallied attributes. The detailed results show that Unethical was first with 13.97 percent, Lazy was second with 12.29 percent, Crooked was third with 11.17 percent, Power hungry and Money hungry were both fourth with 11.17 percent.

Considering the top five attributes on both the female and male in *Good Times*, we have first, Unethical with 13.97 percent, second, Lazy was 12.29 percent, third and fourth, Power hungry and Money hungry both were 12.24 percent and fifth Dumb and Dishonest with 11.17 percent.

To answer the question of which attributes dominate African Americans portrayal in situation comedies pre-*The Cosby Show*, we decided to focus on the top five attributes that have the highest percentage points reflective in both females and males as discussed above in Appendices I and II.

In Appendix V, it was concluded that the dominant attributes pre-*The Cosby Show*, were Inferior first with 15.3 percent, Unethical was second with 14.50 percent, Power hungry and money hungry both with 12.58 percent, and Lazy was fifth at 12.29 percent. Fifth dominant attributes.

Appendices III (*My Wife and Kids*) and IV (*Family Matters*) provide the data for the second part of the question—the post-*The Cosby Show* era. Appendix III provides the data for *My Wife & Kids* that ran on ABC Network from 2001 to 2005. According to this Appendix, the top five attributes on the female section in *My Wife and Kids* were: Money hungry first with 11.8 percent, second, third and fourth, were Insolent, Unethical and Inferior with all at 11.0 percent, and fifth, Lazy with 10.2 percent.

On the male section of Appendix III, the top five attributes in *My Wife and Kids* are Inferior with 14.1 percent, Comical with 13.6 percent, Money hungry with 9.7 percent, with Lazy, Dishonest and Power hungry at 8.7 percent respectively.

Appendix IV *Family Matters* portrays Money hungry with 16.10 percent, Inferior had 11 percent, Power hungry and Crooked with 8.5 percent and Ignorant with 7.2 percent. These dominate the top five percentages of the attributes computed associated with the African-American women on *Family Matters*.

With the male roles, Power hungry leads the list with 14 percent, Unethical follows with 13.54, Dishonest and Money hungry with 11.98 third and Lazy tops the top five attributes with negative African American stereotypes.

To answer the question on which attributes dominate African Americans portrayal in situation comedies post-*The Cosby Show*, we have decided on the top five attributes that have the highest percentage points from the top five discussed in both the female and males discussed above in Appendices III and IV.

The attributes that dominate African Americans portrayed in situation comedies studied post-*The Cosby Show* are Money hungry at 16.10 percent, Inferior with 14.1 percent, Comical had 13.6 percent, Money hungry was 11.8 percent and Inferior, Unethical and Insolent with 11 percent each.

Research question number 2 asks if the overall frequency of portrayals of African-American stereotypical attributes are different pre- and post- *The Cosby Show*, and if so, to what extent?

In Appendix I, the combined “number of times” each stereotypical attribute was portrayed by African Americans, male and female, on *The Jefferson’s* was 282 times. In Appendix II, on *Good Times*, all of the “number of times” the stereotypical attributes were portrayed, female and male, were added together. The total number of portrayals of those attributes were 326. Combining Appendix I and Appendix II, both pre *Cosby* shows, indicate a total of 608 times that the stereotypical attributes were portrayed.

In Appendix III, on *My Wife and Kids*, all of the “number of times” the attributes were portrayed, female and male, were added together. The total portrayals of those attributes were 325. In Appendix IV, the combined “number of times” each stereotypical attribute was portrayed by African Americans, male and female, on *Family Matters* was

347 times. Combining Appendix III and Appendix IV, both post *Cosby* shows, present a total of 672 times that the stereotypical attributes were portrayed.

In analyzing those totals, the assumption is that there is a slight increase in the depiction of stereotypical attributes of African Americans on television after *The Cosby Show* aired. This is contrary to an initial hypothesis one would have suggested considering the major socioeconomic and political progress evidenced over the last 50 years.

Discussion

One might speculate that *The Cosby Show* had little impact because it was but one portrayal of a professional couple raising children “together” in a fairly average middle-class neighborhood. The messages presented by this TV series are clearly positive: the family lives in style, and the depiction of the African American family unit is overwhelmingly portrayed within “proper” societal norms. The parents are loving, the children are polished and mannerly, the grandparents are supportive, and their friends and neighbors appear to be stable and upwardly mobile. However, one could determine that this series was unable to counter the many other stereotypes presented by other series which aired before, after, and during *The Cosby Show*.

One might also examine deeply embedded social norms, perceptions, and individual feelings particularly as they pertain to ethnic and racial bias. It could be concluded that these particular views and emotions are not easily changed. Although *The Cosby Show* is an example of a stellar attempt to portray the African American family in a wholesome light, it was only one series, of many, in a relatively brief period of time.

Limitations & Recommendations

The limitations of the study may also contribute to the unexpected results. An initial hypothesis might have suggested that socioeconomic advancements evidenced over the past 50 years would have had a greater impact on the portrayals of African Americans in general and in their family unit. Situation comedy is a popular genre of programming, and consequently, the way African Americans are portrayed in these comedies should be of interest to all who are interested in studying the effect of pop culture on American society. The use of nominal data in a study does not really tell the whole story in content analysis research, which is seen to be true in this study on the portrayal of African Americans. It is puzzling that despite the gains African Americans have made, the data in this study do not show an improvement in the way African Americans were portrayed in situational comedies; this could be attributed to the following limitations:

First might be the use of nominal data; future studies using T-test, chi-square, or another statistical test might be a more appropriate test to determine if there has been any significant difference in the portrayal of African American in situational comedies pre- and post *The Cosby Show*.

A better explication of a study of African-American portrayal in situational comedies may require a longer sample than the one this study has used. Yet, we cannot dismiss the findings as spurious even if the findings fail to meet our expectations. These would include what “should have been” evidenced since significant advances have been achieved over the past five decades. The show samples might be expanded in a future

study as well as the sample size of participants. There might also be a variation worthy of note if study participants were sorted by gender, age and race.

One might question whether the reaction of the viewers captured in the survey instrument was more reflective of individual perceptions influenced by personal bias, or if there were subtle messages still prevalent in the sample shows.

The way the questions were framed may have not been adequate or detailed enough to determine the most precise findings. They especially could have included positive-attribute-portrayals of African Americans in order to determine if those attributes had also changed. A positive-attribute analysis would have shown more comprehensive results in an overall understanding of the past and present portrayals.

Conclusion

Research findings, overall, indicated conflicted results. More research is necessary in this topic area. Perhaps research questions could be better framed as well as the attributes which are to be examined. Better study participant sample distribution and sorting of data by variables and qualities would add a more comprehensive outcome.

Depiction in the media of particular races, genders and religions say much about the way our society. Similar studies can indicate where our country currently stands as far as social change, progression of multi-cultural interactions, relationships, and an overall understanding of each other. These studies overtime raise awareness of our country's remaining societal issues as related to those of the past, and eventually lead to gradual resolutions.

Appendix I
The Jeffersons

Gender:	Females 7		Males 6	
Attributes	# of times used	%	# of times used	%
Inferior	20	13.3	18	11.92
Lazy	15	11.45	12	7.94
Dumb	8	6.11	8	5.29
Dishonest	9	6.87	9	5.96
Comical	9	6.87	7	4.63
Unethical	19	14.50	19	12.58
Crooked	9	6.87	8	5.29
Insolent	4	3.96	7	4.64
Bestial	8	6.11	7	4.64
Brutish	5	3.87	9	5.96
Power hungry	8	6.11	19	12.58
Money hungry	8	6.11	19	12.58
Ignorant	9	6.87	9	5.99

Appendix II
Good Times

Gender:	Females		Males	
	8		11	
Attributes	# of times used	%	# of times used	%
Inferior	9	6.2	20	11.17
Lazy	9	6.2	22	12.29
Dumb	11	7.48	8	4.17
Dishonest	11	7.48	5	2.79
Comical	10	6.80	5	2.77
Unethical	18	12.24	25	13.97
Crooked	9	6.12	20	11.17
Insolent	9	6.12	9	5.03
Bestial	9	6.12	9	5.06
Brutish	5	3.28	8	4.77
Power hungry	18	12.24	20	11.17
Money hungry	18	12.24	20	11.17
Ignorant	11	7.48	8	4.47

Appendix III
My Wife and Kids

Gender:	Females 7		Males 12	
Attributes	# of times used	%	# of times used	%
Inferior	13	11.0	26	14.1
Lazy	12	10.2	16	8.7
Dumb	10	8.5	9	4.9
Dishonest	10	8.5	16	8.7
Comical	7	5.9	25	13.6
Unethical	13	11.0	7	3.8
Crooked	10	8.5	13	7.0
Insolent	13	11.0	12	6.5
Bestial	11	9.3	10	5.4
Brutish	8	6.4	7	3.8
Power hungry	9	7.6	16	8.9
Money hungry	14	11.8	18	9.7
Ignorant	11	9.3	9	4.9

Appendix IV
Family Matters

Gender:	Females		Males	
	10		10	
Attributes	# of times used	%	# of times used	%
Inferior	19	11	10	5.20
Lazy	9	5.9	17	8.76
Dumb	10	6.5	10	5.20
Dishonest	9	5.9	23	11.98
Comical	9	5.9	13	6.77
Unethical	10	6.5	26	13.54
Crooked	13	8.5	12	6.25
Insolent	9	5.9	7	3.65
Bestial	9	5.9	6	3.13
Brutish	8	6.2	9	4.67
Power hungry	13	8.5	27	14.00
Money hungry	26	16.10	23	11.98
Ignorant	11	7.2	9	4.87

Appendix V: *The Jeffersons* and *Good Times*Top 5 Attributes From Appendix 1: *The Jeffersons*

Inferior	15.3 percent
Unethical	14.50 percent
Power Hungry	12.58 percent
Money hungry	12.58 percent

Top 5 Attributes From Appendix II: *Good Times*

Unethical	13.97 percent
Lazy	12.29 percent
Power hungry	12.24 percent
Money hungry	12.24 percent
Dumb	11.17 percent
Dishonest	11.17 percent

Appendix VI: *My Wife and Kids and Family Matters*

Top 5 Attributes from Appendix III: *My Wife and Kids*

Inferior	14.1 percent
Comical	13.6 percent
Money hungry	11.8 percent
Inferior	11.0 percent
Unethical	11.0 percent
Insolent	11.0 percent

Top 5 Attributes from Appendix IV: *Family Matters*

Money hungry	16.10 percent
Inferior	11.00 percent
Power hungry	8.5 percent
Crooked	8.5 percent
Ignorant	7.2 percent

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