Media Studies

Representations of Ethnicity 1 - Theory

The aims of this Factsheet are to:
- outline the theories connected to representation of ethnicity
- consider the impact representations have on real life

This Factsheet will focus on theories about representations of people of African descent. For more detailed case study examples and in depth analysis of representations, see part 2 of this Factsheet. For an analysis of a different minority ethnic group see Factsheet 085. Representations of Islam and Muslims in the British Press.

> The words race and ethnicity are sometimes used interchangeably but they actually have distinct meanings and any analysis of media texts will be focusing on ethnicity. The idea of racial differences has been used historically to suggest that some groups of people are superior to others, such as white superiority over black as a justification for slavery. Nowadays, it is accepted that there is only one 'race' of people, the human race. However, the ideas of superiority and inferiority still exist in the form of **racism** and this can include prejudice or discrimination based on ethnic differences, such as religion and cultural behaviours.

Definitions

- **Ethnicity** refers to the traditions, cultural practices and language shared by a group of people with a common ancestry.
- **Race** refers to the belief that there are divisions between people based upon distinct physical and biological characteristics, including skin colour.
- **Ethnic minority** refers to all the ethnic groups in a given society who are not part of the majority. In the UK, this would be anyone who is not white British.
- **African-American** is the name given to black people whose ancestors would have been from Africa but who now live in America.
- **African-Carribean** is the name given to black people whose ancestors would have been from Africa but who now live on the Caribbean islands, such as Jamaica, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.
- **Stereotypes** are categories people are placed into by others according to supposed attributes, such as appearance, behaviour or attitude.
- **Prejudice** is thinking poorly of a person or a group of people and it is often based upon stereotypes.
- **Discrimination** is an act that happens as a result of prejudice.

Introduction

The **binary opposition** of black and white is of great cultural significance in Western societies. The **connotations** of the words permeate traditions and cultural practices, including story telling. Where 'white' is taken to mean fair, pure, good and true, in opposition, black is understood to be deadly, malignant, sinister and untrustworthy.

Such connotations have an impact upon how ethnicity is understood as skin tone is such a visible aspect of some ethnic groups' identities. In *The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media* (1981), Stuart **Hall** explained how 'white' came to mean civilization and 'black' synonymous for nature. This allowed connections to be made between black people and underdevelopment or primitivism. Racist prejudices have historically linked darker skin tones with inferiority or villainy and representations that perpetuate this idea have always been evident in the media.

(http://starwars.com/img/explore/encyclopedia/characters/lukeskywalker_detail.png)
(http://starwars.com/img/explore/encyclopedia/characters/darthvader_detail.png)

The binary opposition of good and evil has often been presented in terms of white and black in narratives.

Activity
Analyse the following image in terms of how the binary opposition of black and white has been used. In what ways does it reinforce the idea of black people being inferior?

(http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/images/hsirhan/2007/01/27/67_sony_ad.jpg?maxWidth=500)
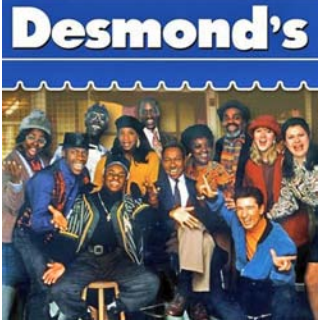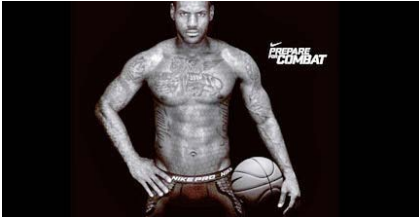
Theory of representations of black people

Theorist	Ideas	Example
Hall (1981)	**Hall** suggested that the media plays a central role in spreading the ideas of the **dominant ideology**. He thought that repeated representations in the media made the audience believe this is how the world really is and that such portrayals became 'naturalised' or 'common sense'. In Western societies, the dominant group is white and the media present being white as so 'normal' and 'natural' that it is barely noticeable when white people are represented in the media. He called this the '**white eye'**, which suggests the media texts are produced *by* white people *for* white people using white representations. As a result, it becomes more difficult to have representations of other ethnic groups in the media as this disrupts the white status quo.	The five directors and five writers who have worked on the most episodes of *EastEnders* are all white. In addition, the top 18 characters who have been in the most episodes are all white. The lack of representations in the media of a group of people is called **symbolic annihilation**. John Greening has written over 150 episodes of *EastEnders*. *(http://www.curtisbrown.co.uk/ file.ashx?image=4523&height=204&width=204)*
Gillespie (1989)	Situation comedies of the 1960s and 1970s reflected concerns about black immigrants integrating into British society. Such shows positioned black people as a problem and a threat to national British unity.	Narratives in programmes such as *Love Thy Neighbour* (ITV 1972 – 76) focused on the antagonism between black and white characters. Actor Rudolph Walker went on to play another stereotypical black character as Patrick Truman in *EastEnders*. *(http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-fMyij3bH2PM/TtJVrdpHifI/ AAAAAAAABIc/tKYMbDpcYms/s1600/love-thy-neighbour- logo.jpg)*
Bourne (1989)	Early soap operas omitted ethnic minority characters as it was felt their inclusion would disrupt the white characters' narratives and potentially reveal racist attitudes. When ethnic minority characters were introduced, they were still marginalized in the plot, were represented in stereotypical ways and were underused characters.	Despite having the largest role of any minority ethnic character and being in the soap for about 800 episodes, the character of Patrick Truman relies heavily upon stereotypes of African-Caribbean people. Patrick was born in Trinidad but came to England for work in the 1950s, he has a criminal record for his involvement in the Notting Hill riots, he loves rum, ska music and gambling and he was an absent father for much of his sons' lives. *(http://img.thesun.co.uk/multimedia/ archive/00176/I_intprod1- 8000base_176685a.jpg)*

Theory of representations of black people (continued)

Theorist	Ideas	Example
van Dijk (1991)	In his paper entitled 'Racism and the Press', van Dijks carried out a longitudinal content analysis of several thousand news items from across the world. From this, he identified several stereotypical categories that ethnic minorities are assigned to in news stories. These include: • **Criminals** – In the tabloid press, African-Caribbean people in particular tend to be shown as criminals, such as being involved in gangs, knife crime or dealing drugs. • **Dependent** – News stories often show black people as being from less economically developed countries and dependent upon Western countries. It is implied that problems in these countries are self-inflicted and the result of laziness or stupidity on the part of the ethnic minorities. • **Abnormal** – Some cultural practices are shown to be deviant, unnecessary and even barbaric. • **Unimportant** – Some parts of the news media suggest that white people are more important than ethnic minorities. Stories in the news about non-white people are often restricted to a few lines and may be tinged with institutional racism.	Much news coverage of the London riots in August 2011 showed images that suggested that there were a significant number of black teenagers involved in looting and criminal activities. In addition, broadcaster Darcus Howe was accused of taking part in riots by BBC news reporter Fiona Armstrong during an interview, an accusation he strongly contested live on air. *(http://metro.co.uk/2011/08/11/london-riots-bbc-apologises-for-accusing-darcus-howe-of-rioting-116967/)*
Wilson and Gutierrez (1995)	American advertising has relied upon stereotypical representations of black people but has also exploited the idea of 'racial pride' to encourage conspicuous consumption, which means buying name brand products as part of a lifestyle choice. In this way, stereotypes of black people are presented as positive portrayals. Such portrayals are a good example of Hall's 'white eye' according to Wilson and Gutierrez.	Newport menthol cigarette adverts have often used representations of African-Americans but these tend to rely upon supposedly 'positive' stereotypes such as being 'cool' or good at sport. (http://si.wsj.net/public/resources/images/P1AY901_lorill_DV_20110104184514.jpg) *(http://www.tobaccofreekids.org/ad_gallery)*
Ross (1996)	The negative stereotypes that were evident in early films, such as the 'happy slave' and the 'entertainer', transferred to television. These representations conform to white people's expectations of what black people are and, in their view, should be like. She believes that the predominance of white controllers in the media mean that ethnic minority representations can never develop beyond stereotypes.	*The Black and White Minstrel Show* ran on the BBC from 1958 to 1978. It featured white actors wearing black-face, which is the name given to the dark make-up that over exaggerated the size of the actor's lips and the whites of their eyes. Black-face make-up was used in early films as segregation and racism in America meant that black people rarely had significant roles in films. *(http://www.sterlingtimes.org/black_and_white_minstrel_show.jpg)*

Theory of representations of black people (continued)

Theorist	Ideas	Example
Pilkington (2003)	There has been an improvement in the representations of ethnic minority people in the media, especially television and film. There is now a greater range of representations and a better portrayal of the complexity of black people's lives.	This is evident in sitcoms such as *Desmond's* (Channel 4 1989 – 1994), which had a predominantly black cast and was about a black-owned barber shop. *(http://www.afroklectic.com/ 2010/12/the-desmonds/)*
Watson (2008)	The media's stereotyping of black people can lead to moral panics in the news. This is where a story is exaggerated by the media institution and a group of people are labeled as 'folk devils' or the cause of the perceived problem. Hall (1978) identified a moral panic around stories of black 'muggers' and there have been further moral panics about black teenagers and knife crime in recent years.	This story from the *Daily Mail's* website illustrates the moral panic surrounding black youths and knife crime. *(http://www.dailymail.co.uk/ news/article-1036833/Over-half- young-knife-suspects-black- Scotland-Yard-figures- reveal.html)*
The Opportunity Agenda Report (2011)	This report is a literature review of writings about 'Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys'. The report outlines what they call a **"distorted pattern of portrayal"** of black men. They claim: • black men are underrepresented overall in the media in terms of factual programming and as relatable fictional characters • negative associations are exaggerated so black men are shown to be connected with criminality, unemployment and poverty more than is truthful • positive associations for black men are limited to entertainment, mainly those linked to physical achievement such as sport • black males tend to be associated with problems that are impossible to solve • the historical context of black men's lives is missing from the media, such as reasons for black economic disadvantage	The cover of *Sports Illustrated* magazine emphasizes LeBron James' physical prowess and makes reference to his "power". *(http://garciamedialife.files .wordpress.com/2011/06/ lebron-james-cover.jpg)* In addition, the campaign James fronts for Nike, focuses on his muscular appearance and the idea of combat and domination. *(http://www.waitingfornextyear.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/ LeBron-Rejected-Nike-Ad-Campaign-Mural.jpg)*

Theory of representations of black people (continued)

Theorist	Ideas	Example
Leonard (2011)	In his article 'New Media Technology and the Persistence of Racist Representations', Leonard points out that new media have impacted representations of black people in two main ways: • the internet has allowed people who are normally excluded from the production process to create their own products with black-themed and alternative narratives • the existence of video hosting sites like *YouTube* has allowed for the preservation of racist representations from the past Though no longer considered appropriate for broadcast on television, it is still possible to view and download cartoons made in the 1930s and 40s that contain racist imagery via *iTunes*. Whilst Leonard states there is some benefit of this for research purposes it is still problematic as it is not always clear how the racist texts are being used or understood by the audience.	*The LeBrons* is an animated web-based series based on a mock family that represents four aspects of LeBron James' personality: the kid, the athlete, the business and the wise man. *(http://sweetspill.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/the-lebrons-animated-series1.jpg)* This image from the *Tom and Jerry* cartoon 'His Mouse Friday' was taken from an Ebay auction that was selling copies as prints for display. It shows Jerry in black-face and behaving like a cannibalistic African 'savage'. *(http://i.ebayimg.com/t/his-mouse-friday-rare-lpp-color-print-of-the-banned-tom-and-jerry-classic-/00/s/mzywwdq4ma==/$(kgrhqj,!q!fbzqt+)fibqe8(o(y(w~~60_35.jpg)*

Activity
Choose a representation of black people in the media and apply the theories discussed above to it.
For example, you could look at whether:
• *rappers like The Game reinforce stereotypes of black criminality*
• *charity adverts show African countries as being dependent on Western countries*
• *the BBC sitcom* The Crouches *offered positive representations of its black cast*

Exam Hint:- *When using theories in your exam, make sure you apply them to relevant examples to show the examiner that you understand what you are writing.*
Your example may be historical in some circumstances but you should try to use up to date representations as examples as well

Impact of representations on real life

The representations discussed above are of importance because, according to The Opportunity Agenda Report literature review, "**distorted portrayals can be expected to create problematic understandings and attitudes amongst audiences**". The writers claim there is a causal link between representations in the media and public attitudes towards black people.

The problematic attitudes are:
• general antagonism towards black males
• exaggerated expectations and tolerance of differences in economic privilege between ethnic groups
• exaggerated views of criminality and violence by black men
• lack of identification with, and sympathy for, black males
• reduced attention to the factors that create inequalities
• public support for punishments as a solution for black males' problems

The report suggests that these issues are most prominent when audience members do not have real world experience of ethnic minority people. This idea is supported by **Ross** (1992) who claimed that the attitudes of white people towards non-white people are influenced by representations in the media. She found that, although white people knew that representation of other ethnic groups were stereotypical in media texts, they still continued to attribute negative characteristics to them in real life. This was especially the case with white people who had less contact with ethnic minority groups in real life. What Ross called their '**secondary experiences**' of ethnic groups via the media, therefore, became very important to their understanding of ethnicity.

Beyond how representations affects white people's perceptions of ethnic minority groups, Hall suggested that such portrayals also led black people to understand themselves in terms of the representations they see in the media, namely as 'other' or different from the 'norm'. This idea is supported by **Thomas et al** (2008) who found that the stereotypical representations in music videos of black people caused African-American teenagers to have lower racial self-esteem or to see their own ethnicity in a more negative way compared to being white. The Opportunity Agenda Report states that negative stereotypes are demoralising and reduce black male's self-esteem and expectations of themselves. Even representations of black men that seem to be positive offer only restricted role models predominantly connected with music or sport. The writers claim that black men internalise biased media stereotypes and then reinforce or perpetuate the negative labels through their own behaviour.

Prejudice against ethnic minority groups as a result of audience's responses to media representations can become discrimination when it impacts non-white people's chances of getting employment and this is evident in the percentages of ethnic minority people who work in media industries. In 2001, the BBC's director general, Greg Dyke, complained that the BBC as an institution was "hideously white", meaning very few non-white people were employed or represented. In 2012, the BBC employs 12% of its staff from ethnic minority groups, which is above the national population average of 8%. However, there is still a lack of ethnic minorities at a senior level in the institution. Despite the work of the Cultural Diversity Network, which attempts to pair ethnic minority media workers with mentors within the industry, black TV producer Geoff Small thinks that, at a senior level, the BBC is no more diverse than it was 15 years ago. Trevor Philips, who wrote a report on diversity in television, thinks that stereotypical representations are partly to blame for the lack of minority ethnic people in positions of power and that there will be no progress in real life employment opportunities until representations change.