

*Human Communication*. A Publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association  
Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 33 – 44

**The Impact of Television Viewing on Young Adults' Stereotypes Towards Hispanic Americans**

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### Abstract

This study examines the influence of television viewing and interpersonal contact on young adults' stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans. The study shows that television viewing has a significant impact on White Americans' negative stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans when White Americans perceive that they learn about Hispanic Americans from watching television. The study found that talking to Hispanic Americans and positive evaluation of contact were found to have an impact on White Americans' positive stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans. These results suggest that television viewing and interpersonal contact may have a significant influence on stereotype development towards Hispanic Americans.

**Keywords:** Television influence, Stereotypes, Hispanic Americans and Intercultural Communication (Running head: TV Stereotypes Towards Hispanic Americans)

Stereotypes are individual mental images that shape people's interpretation and influence public opinions (Lippman, 1922). Research shows that an individual's stereotypes can be learned by viewing television (Tan, Fujioka, & Lucht, 1997; Fujioka, 1999; Tan, Fujioka, & Tan, 2000; Tan, Fujioka, & Tan, 2001). Television, which is such a powerful socialization agent, provides a vicarious social contact environment through which viewers construct their social reality of and develop their attitudes towards some social groups (Fujioka, 1999).

Stereotypes are an individual's perceptions and interpretations that are connected closely with prejudice and discrimination. Negative stereotypes generate people's negative perception about certain social groups (Sherman, 1996) and enable individuals to make social judgments about certain groups and individuals (Allport, 1954). It is critical to develop a better understanding of how individuals develop their negative stereotypes and find out ways to reduce as well as prevent these negative stereotypes from developing in an individual's mind.

Research shows that minority groups continue to experience stereotypical portrayals in the media (Billings, 2003; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997; Jensen, 1996; Merskin, 1998; Merskin, 2001; Miller & Ross, 2004; Paek & Shah, 2003). Minority groups including Hispanics, Blacks and Asians in comparison to Whites were perceived to be less intelligent, poorer, and more violence prone (Tan, Fujioka & Lucht, 1997). A recent study by Clawson and Kegler (2000) found that African Americans are stereotypically portrayed as poor in college textbooks.

The impact of television portrayals of minorities is significant because of the ability of television images to activate racial stereotypes and the power exerted by visual images (Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 1996). The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of television viewing on young adults' stereotype development towards Hispanic Americans. The reason for selecting young adults for investigation is that they are still in an active stage of the socialization process (Erikson, 1968).

## Literature Review

### Stereotypes

Stereotypes are perceptions and interpretations connected closely with prejudice and discrimination. The negative stereotype is the first layer of inequality, that forms the basis of one's knowledge about certain social groups (Sherman, 1996) and enables people to make social judgments about certain group individuals (Allport, 1954). The second layer is prejudice in which racial stereotypes tend to be rooted. Prejudice is "a hostile or negative attitude towards a distinguishable group of people, based solely on their membership in that group" (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1999, p.501). Discrimination is the third layer, which is an act or action towards other people to exclude them from public or private social rights (Allport, 1954). Reskin (2000) suggested that discrimination was caused by both stereotypes and prejudice. Also, Lind (1996) suggested that *passive racism*, the belief that racism is irrelevant, might be a barrier to equality.

Stereotypes, particularly negative stereotypes, may consciously or subconsciously affect individuals' social judgment as well as their decision making process. A popular American stereotype about Hispanic males "involves aggression and the potential for violence—a very powerful dispositional attribution" (Aronson, et al., 1999, p.522). Stereotypes have been used to "justify hostility" (Allport, 1954, p. 200). Also, the effects of stereotypes have been harmful and lasting because "once formed, stereotypes are resistant to change on the basis of new information" (Aronson, et al., 1999, p.502). Racial stereotypes have been defined as "a particular subset of social reality beliefs: (they are) understandings about particular social groups that we

have learned from our social world” (Gorham, 1999, p. 231). Therefore, stereotypes can be harmful and damage interracial relationships.

### **Hispanic Americans in American Media**

Hispanic American actors have not been seen often on television programming (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). When Hispanic Americans were included in television programming, they tended to be portrayed in crime shows or as comedians, which could promote negative stereotypes about Hispanic Americans (Johnson, 1999). Ford (1997) investigated college students’ perceptions of television stereotypes and found that when White people viewed stereotypical television portrayals of minorities in a comedic context, White people tended to perceive minority individuals in a stereotypical manner. Mastro (2003) provided evidence of mass media’s impact on social perception by showing that television amusement shows can influence attitudes towards minority groups. Therefore, comical racial stereotypes portrayed on television may contribute to White people’s negative stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans.

Hispanic Americans have been consistently portrayed as “socially disadvantaged” on television and they have been 50% less likely to occupy professional occupations than have Whites (Lichter, Lichter, Rothman, & Amundson, 1987). During the period 1955 through 1986, Hispanic Americans accounted for less than two percent of the total television roles (Lichter, et al., 1987). Negative stereotypes of Hispanic Americans included lazy, criminal, angry and comical (Lichter, et al., 1987).

In the 1980’s, Hispanic Americans were regularly portrayed in television roles as criminals and drug dealers. Television shows like *Hunter*, *Hill Street Blues*, and *Miami Vice* persistently portrayed Hispanic Americans in leading roles as evil “drug lords” (Lichter, et al., 1987, p. 15). Compared to Whites and African Americans, Hispanic Americans have been “the only group with a mainly negative TV image” (Lichter, et al., 1987, p. 16). More recently, Hispanic Americans have been represented in less than three percent of the characters portrayed on television (Johnson, 1999). Further, they tended to be portrayed in either comical, criminal or law enforcement occupational roles instead of professional roles (Johnson, 1999). Therefore, Hispanic Americans have been stereotypically portrayed as unprofessional on television.

Gomez (n.d.) emphasized that mass media dis-serve the Hispanic people because they continued generating negative stereotypes. He said that news coverage of Hispanic people focused more on crime, immigration and drugs rather than achievements. He added that American electronic media distorted Hispanic truths, making Hispanic children grow up with few role models on television.

People of color have also been marginalized on prime-time commercials through stereotypical portrayals (Henderson & Baldasty, 2003). This study found that people of color usually appeared in athletic shoe or fast food commercials, while Whites usually appeared in affluent commercials for automobile and household products (Henderson & Baldasty, 2003). People of color were usually portrayed in stereotypical roles in prime-time commercials while Whites were usually portrayed in responsible roles (Henderson & Baldasty, 2003).

The research showed that racial stereotypes portrayed in the media could impact individuals’ perceptions of media content to the extent of supporting widely held racial stereotypes (Gorham, 1999). Through constant exposure to racial stereotypes in television programming, media stereotypes “could maintain unjust, harmful, and dominating understandings of race by influencing the way individuals interpret media text” (Gorham, 1999, p. 244). Tovaes (2000) found that television news coverage of Mexican American gangs reinforced negative stereotypes.

### **Vicarious Learning and Stereotype Development**

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002) suggested that television viewers have a vicarious capability by which they could “expand their knowledge and skills rapidly through information conveyed by the rich variety of models” (p. 126). Bandura (2002) pointed out that “virtually all behavioral, cognitive, and affective learning from indirect experience could be achieved vicariously by observing people’s actions and its consequences for them” (p. 126). According to social cognitive theory, individuals could pick up values, ideals, and behaviors from observing television programs through a process of modeling (Bandura, 2002). Therefore, social cognitive theory could be used to help explain how people develop stereotypes towards a certain group of people through television viewing.

Cultivation theory also helped explain development of stereotypes through television viewing (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). Morgan & Signorielli (1990) argued that television has become the nation’s most common and constant learning environment. Gerbner and his colleagues suggested that television presents a distorted but uniform portrayal of social reality which is internalized by heavy viewers. Potter (1991) pointed out that perceived realism of the television message is an intervening variable in cultivation process. According to Austin and Dong (1994), perceived realism can be interpreted as perceived reality which is viewed as the degree to which an individual believes that a reality portrayed in television matches the true world. Austin and Dong argued that individual viewers tended to put modeled behavior into practice if they viewed the portrayal as realistic, justified, and rewarded (1994). According to cultivation theory, television viewing has shaped viewers’ values, attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes.

The contact hypothesis was developed by Gordon Allport (1954). Allport said that “Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals” (Allport, 1954, p. 281). It can be argued that a lack of contact, or mediated contact between groups lacking equal status, common goals, institutional supports, or common interests, may lead to increased prejudice and stereotypes between groups (Tan, et al., 1997). Thus, distorted media portrayals of minority groups might cause majority groups to develop stereotypes towards minorities where there was a lack of interpersonal contact, under specific conditions, between the two groups (Tan, et al., 1997).

Hughes and Baldwin’s study (2002) of behaviors, stereotypes, and interracial communication between Whites and African Americans found that Whites tended to characterize African Americans who spoke loudly as being argumentative and aggressive. Hughes and Baldwin (2002) also found that Whites tended to characterize African Americans who spoke slang as being noisy. However, inter-group contact was tested using the contact hypothesis and results showed significant correlations between interracial contact and favorable out-group opinions (Ellison & Powers, 1994; Post & Rinden, 2000; Sigelman & Welch, 1993; Stein, Post & Rinden, 2000; Welch & Sigelman, 2000).

Research has showed that positive media images of people with disabilities can change individuals’ attitudes. A secondary analysis of survey data drawn from 1,257 adults interviewed for the National Organization on Disability showed that individuals exposed to positive television and movie images tended to have greater positive perceptions and attitudes towards people with disabilities (Farnall & Smith, 1999). This finding suggested adults who viewed positive portrayals of people with disabilities tended to develop positive stereotypes towards

them. However, the research also showed that adults who had personal contact with people with disabilities tended to feel uncomfortable with people with disabilities (Farnall & Smith, 1999).

A study of Native American stereotypes using the contact hypothesis showed significant results. Tan and his colleagues found that “perceived positive and negative TV attributes predict stereotyping only for traits more easily depicted in television, such as violence and affluence” (p. 279). Tan et al. (1997) reported that “frequent personal contact led to positive stereotyping, as did positive evaluations of first contact” (p. 279). Another study found that Japanese students, who had substantially less contact with African-Americans than did White students, held more stereotypes towards African-Americans than did White students (Fujioka, 1999). These results supported the contact hypothesis because absence of contact correlated with increased stereotyping (Fujioka, 1999). Furthermore, Fujioka’s study suggested that individuals’ observation and subsequent appraisal of television portrayals, instead of accumulation of television images viewed, resulted in a substantial alteration of stereotypes. Tan, Fujioka, and Tan (2000) also found that White students who perceived TV portrayals of African Americans as negative substantially predicted some negative stereotypes that predicted disagreement with affirmative action policies.

Gorham’s study (1999) of racial stereotypes in television programming provided support for the social cognitive theory approach to the impact of television viewing on stereotypes because individuals’ observation of television portrayals affected their interpretation of racial stereotypes. Mastro and Tropp (2004) examined White subjects’ perceptions of stereotypical televised portrayals of African Americans based on level of contact and prejudice, and they found that close contact resulted in positive stereotypes of television portrayals of African American characters except when White subjects possessed a high level of prejudice. Mastro and Tropp’s (2004) study also showed that “greater contact can promote positive evaluations of out-group members both in interpersonal interactions and in response to television portrayals” (p. 126). Therefore, the impact of mass media on individuals’ stereotypes of ethnic groups has been powerful.

Based on the review of literature, it is assumed that television viewers will develop stereotypes towards Hispanic individuals through a process of social learning and cultivation if direct contact is lacking. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H1:** The more people learn about Hispanic Americans from television viewing, the more likely they will have negative stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans.

Television viewing can have a powerful impact on individuals’ perceptions about other people, and more so when personal contact is minimal or absent.

**H2:** Those who are positive about their contact with Hispanic Americans will tend to have positive stereotypes towards them.

The hypothesis suggests that the more individuals evaluate personal contact as positive or pleasant, the more likely they will hold positive perceptions or stereotypes about such individuals or groups of the individuals.

**H3:** The more people talk to Hispanic Americans, the more they develop positive stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans.

Social contact is expected to have a positive impact on individuals’ attitudes or stereotypes towards groups and individuals of the groups.

### Methods

The sample of undergraduate college students (N = 474) was collected at a private university in Northern California. Due to the design of the current study, only young White

adults (N=231) were included in hypothesis testing. A self-administered questionnaire was administered to subjects during their class sessions. The questionnaire contained a combination of Likert scale and open-ended questions to measure subjects' perceptions, attitudes and behaviors.

### **Measurement**

The questionnaire contained eight sections to measure key variables related to stereotype development including interpersonal contact with Hispanic Americans ("I talk with Hispanic Americans very often"), stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans ("Hispanic Americans are gang members and Hispanic Americans are leaders"), television's impact on subjects ("I learn about other races by watching TV"), and television portrayals of Hispanic Americans ("Television portrays Hispanic Americans negatively").

The Hispanic negative stereotype index is a measurement of negative stereotypes. It included four items: "Hispanic Americans are gang members," "Hispanic Americans are dangerous," "Hispanic Americans are ignorant," and "Hispanic Americans are drunks." One statement, "Hispanic Americans are poor," was dropped from the index due to the poor loading factor. This negative stereotype index was developed based on a review of literature and the reliability test (alpha) was .84.

The Hispanic Positive Index is a measurement of positive stereotypes. It included four items: "Hispanic Americans are educated," "Hispanic Americans are wise," "Hispanic Americans are leaders," and "Hispanic Americans are intellectual." One statement, "Hispanic Americans are hard workers," was removed from the index due to the poor loading factor. The positive stereotype index was developed based on a review of literature and the reliability test (alpha) was .81.

A key independent variable measured was subjects' learning about other races by watching television. Other independent variables included personal contact with Hispanic Americans, evaluation of personal contact with Hispanic Americans, and television viewing. Demographic variables such as gender, age, and grade in school were also included in the set of independent variables.

### **Results**

Three main steps were used in analyzing results. First, a descriptive analysis was conducted to develop a basic understanding of the key variables involved. Second, a correlation analysis was done to see the key variables' relationships. Third, a stepwise regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses.

The sample of this study included 474 students. (Only White respondents were used for testing hypotheses). The average age in the sample was 20 years. There were 61.5% female respondents and 38.5% male respondents. In terms of ethnicity, 50.1% (231) of respondents were White Americans, 23% (106) were Asian Americans, 10% (46) were Hispanic Americans, 3.3% (15) were African Americans, .4% (2) were Native Americans, and 13.2% (61) listed their ethnicity as "others."

From the correlation analysis (see Table 1), the Hispanic negative stereotype index was highly correlated with respondents who reported that they learned about other races from watching television ( $r = .19^{**}$ ) and positively correlated with those who identified with many television portrayals ( $r = .15^*$ ). The Hispanic Negative index was negatively correlated with respondents who talked to Hispanic Americans often ( $r = -.16^*$ ) and with those who evaluated their contact with Hispanic Americans as pleasant ( $r = -.14^*$ ). The Hispanic Negative index was negatively correlated with the Hispanic Positive index ( $r = -.48^{**}$ ).

**Table 1: Correlation Analysis of Key Variables**

Variables						
1. Negative stereotype						
2. Positive stereotype	.48*					
3. Learn races from TV	.19**	.01				
4. identify TV portrayals	.15*	.02	.39**			
5. My contact is pleasant	-.14*	.28**	.01	.01	.15*	
6. I talk to Hispanic Americans	.16*	.17*	.12	.11	.14*	.29**

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

The Hispanic positive index was highly positively correlated with White Americans who evaluated their contact with Hispanic Americans as pleasant ( $r = .28^{**}$ ) and positively correlated with White Americans who talked with Hispanic Americans very often ( $r = .17^*$ ). The correlation analysis (Table 1) showed the relationships among key variables for the study.

**Hypothesis Testing**

Hypothesis 1 said, “The more people learn about Hispanic Americans from television viewing, the more likely they have negative stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans.”

Results of regression analysis supported the hypothesis ( $B = .13$ ;  $p<.001$ ) as showed in Table 2.

The results showed that the more individuals depended on television for their understanding of other races such as Hispanic Americans, the more likely they tended to develop negative stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans. This reconfirmed that the television programs continue their negative portrayals of Hispanic Americans. The results also showed that the more individuals think well of their contact with Hispanic Americans, the less they had negative stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans ( $B= -.12$ ;  $p<.05$ ).

**Table 2: Hypothesis Testing**

**Summary of Regression analysis for Variables Predicting Hispanic Negative Stereotype. (Dependant Variable=Hispanic Negative Stereotypes)**

Variables	B	SE	t	Beta
Learn other races from TV	0.13	0.04	2.93	0.20**
Contact pleasant	-0.12	0.05	-2.18	-0.15*

Note: \*\*p< .001; \*p< .05

Hypothesis 2 said that “Those who are positive about their contact with Hispanic Americans will tend to have positive stereotypes towards them.” Results of regression analysis showed that the more highly individuals evaluated their contact with Hispanic Americans, the more they had positive stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans ( $B= .18$ ;  $p<.001$ ) as shown in Table 3. Positive evaluation of personal contact with Hispanic Americans was the most powerful

predictor of Hispanic Positive Stereotypes. The findings supported Hypothesis 2.

**Table 3: Hypothesis Testing**

**Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Hispanic Positive Stereotypes  
(Dependent Variable = Hispanic Positive Stereotypes)**

Variables	B	SE	t	Beta
Contact pleasant	0.18	0.04	4.16	0.28**

Note: \*\*p< .001

Hypothesis 3 said that “the more people talk to Hispanic Americans, the more they develop positive stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans.” Results of correlation analysis in Table 1 showed that there was statistically significant positive correlation between talking to Hispanic Americans and “positive stereotypes.” In regression analysis, when the variable of positive evaluation of contact with Hispanic Americans is controlled, talking to Hispanic Americans was the sole predictor to the positive stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans (B=.17; p< .001). Therefore, the hypothesis is only conditionally supported by the results as showed in Table 4.

**Table 4: Hypothesis Testing**

**Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Hispanic Positive Stereotypes  
(Dependent Variable = Hispanic Positive Stereotypes)**

Variable	B	SE	t	Beta
Talking with Hispanic Americans	0.09	0.04	2.53	0.17**

Note: \*\*p< .01

### Discussion

This study helps us develop a better understanding of the impact of television on individuals’ negative stereotypes. Brown (2003) said that an individual’s stereotypes are shaped through a cognitive process. The current study showed that White Americans tend to develop negative stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans when they depend on television to learn about them. This finding indicates that people are influenced by television images. The more negative images are shown on television, the more likely the viewers pick up the images and develop their stereotypes. This finding also suggests that today’s television programs still contain negative images about Hispanic Americans.

This study also indicates that personal contact is critical to the development of a better understanding of other ethnicities. The more individuals could interact with other people who have different cultural backgrounds, the more likely these individuals could see the positive traits and characteristics of the other people. This finding suggests that human interaction and direct contact are a key to understanding between people and, in particular, among those who have different cultural backgrounds.

The implication of this study is that television is an important socialization agent. This study reveals that television can produce negative stereotypes. This study also shows that in order to reduce negative stereotypes, people should have more opportunities to learn about other races through direct social interaction.

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Future researchers need to continue working on this topic and use a large sample size with random selection to see various populations to better understand how stereotypes develop. Additional measurements can be developed to study intended behaviors to see whether or not these negative stereotypes can lead towards prejudiced behavior. One of the limitations of the study is the use of non-random sampling. Non-random sampling limits the generalizability of the study and future research may correct that.

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