

Writing the Wrong: Can Counter-Stereotypes Offset Negative Media Messages about African Americans?

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Abstract

Several studies show media messages activate or exacerbate racial stereotypes. This analysis, however, may be the first to examine which types of information—those that directly contradict media messages (i.e., crime-related) or general news (i.e., non-crime-related)—are most effective in abating stereotypes. Its findings suggest fear of crime is becoming more a *human* fear, not just a racial one. Furthermore, it suggests that for younger Americans, the concomitant dyad of the black criminal stereotype—race and crime—is fueled more by crime than by race.

Keywords

priming, blacks, crime, counter-stereotypes

A vast body of research across disciplines¹ shows that media coverage of crime conflates blackness with criminality.¹ Political science scholars have noted this perspective is so ingrained that politicians know that when they are talking about crime they are also de facto talking about race.² Cognition studies have found that just seeing a black face can cause some whites to view blacks along stereotypical lines.³

Academic scholarship is replete with studies showing how racial stereotypes are formed,⁴ the media's role in exacerbating them,⁵ and their consequences for blacks.⁶ This analysis, however, examines which types of media stories are most effective in slowing

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audiences' belief in racial stereotypes—those that directly conflict with media messages (i.e., crime-related counter-stereotypes) or generally positive news stories (i.e., non-crime-related counter-stereotypes)—or whether no counter-stereotypical message can alter audiences' perception. While few studies have examined counter-stereotypes,⁷ and some have analyzed audience literacy,⁸ this analysis is significant in that it is one of the first to examine the effectiveness of particular story types on abating racial prejudice.

This analysis focuses exclusively on crime because it is the dominant racial stereotype borne from media messages.⁹ Priming serves as its theoretical basis, as expansive research shows negative racial perceptions are often primed by negative media portrayals.¹⁰ This research is also significant because it has real-world applications for media. As priming can steer judgment,¹¹ media can play a role in ameliorating racial stereotypes by including some types of stories rather than others. At present, media help prime negative perceptions of blacks.¹² Cognitive research has found that once these beliefs are primed, they can influence subsequent judgments, often leading to whites judging blacks' behavior as either confirming or contradicting racial stereotypes.¹³ Thus, as the dominant means through which most Americans come to understand the world, stereotypical media messages can have an inordinate influence on the public's perception of blacks.¹⁴

In short, this analysis examines the media's role in shaping race perception and how the media can craft messages that attenuate racial stereotypes. The importance of the media's role in race perception cannot be overstated. As Chaffee and German asserted, "Media socialize the entire population, mainstream and minority, young and old, by the way they depict and discuss minorities."¹⁵ Determining how to change that link is the central focus of this analysis.

Cognition, race, and prejudice. A classic definition holds that racial stereotypes are gross overgeneralizations about specific out-groups in which certain negative behaviors and traits are overexaggerated to the detriment of persons within that group.¹⁶ Scholars are far from uniform in determining whether stereotypes are a natural outgrowth of prejudice or if the two concepts are cognitively distinct. Devine asserted that both classic and modern scholars view stereotypes as a veritable precursor to prejudice.¹⁷ To wit, she noted that scholars have long argued that as long as stereotypes exist, prejudice is sure to follow. Accordingly she remarked, "Even for subjects who honestly report having no negative prejudice against blacks, activation of stereotypes can have automatic effects that, if not consciously monitored, produce effects that resemble prejudiced responses."¹⁸ Moreover, she argued that stereotypes are largely inescapable. They occur despite deliberate attempts to ignore them.

Similarly, Greenwald and Banaji suggest that forming stereotypes may be beyond the conscious control of the perceiver.¹⁹ Implicit social cognition suggests that traces of past experiences, about which perceivers may not be aware, often influence people's attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. Furthermore, Bargh, Chen, and Burrows found that both low- and high-prejudiced whites had less favorable reactions to photos of blacks than to photos of whites.²⁰ These reactions, they assert, are unintentional—especially for less prejudiced people—but reflect the fact that even unintended feelings can affect attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of blacks.²¹

Automatic, however, does not mean impervious to change. In a series of three experiments, Lepore and Brown found that both high- and low-prejudiced people were equally knowledgeable about racial stereotypes.²² However, high-prejudiced people are more attuned to the negative, while less-prejudiced people are more attuned to the positive traits of blacks. Consequently, the researchers concluded that the difference between high- and low-prejudiced people is not their knowledge, but their endorsement of racial stereotypes.

Other scholars point to how racial attitudes can fluctuate over time, and in different circumstances, as evidence that prejudices are neither inescapable nor immutable. Wittenbrink, Judd, and Park found that blacks who were seen in a positive context (i.e., a family barbecue) were judged more favorably than blacks seen in a negative context (i.e., a gang incident).²³ In addition, they discovered that priming audiences with negative contextual cues tends to evoke harsh reactions, while positive priming mitigates this effect. Hence, they surmised that stereotype formation is not a veritable cognitive reflex, as suggested by some scholars,²⁴ but is, rather, triggered by situational factors.

In summary, scholars are not in agreement about the degree to which stereotypes are malleable. One perspective holds that stereotype formation is automatic. Adherents to this belief argue that stereotypes are a natural outgrowth of racial prejudice. Others argue that automatic does not mean unchangeable. They assert that the degree to which stereotypes are activated fluctuates depending on circumstance, situation, and contextual factors, such as the environment in which blacks are shown. These scholars argue that this variation shows stereotype formation is more of a learned belief than an intrinsic feature of white culture.

Priming blackness and criminality. Media scholars define priming as a mental process in which certain aspects of an issue are made more prominent by media and thus more influential in guiding a person's judgment.²⁵ Priming works because people tend to be cognitive misers, paying more attention to information that is readily available, or more easily accessed, than to all the information available to them.²⁶

Gilliam and Iyengar argued that local television news is "America's principal window on the world."²⁷ As such, it serves as the foremost primer of race perception. They argue that through this window Americans see an inordinate percentage of blacks portrayed as criminals. This overexposure has the dual effect of causing many whites to conflate violence with being black and increasing the belief that committing crime is a natural tendency for blacks. Moreover, Gilliam and Iyengar noted that crime coverage provides a readily available two-part script: first, that all crime is violent and, second, that non-white males commit it. In a racial sense, this suggests that, once activated, stereotypical beliefs are more quickly brought to mind, especially if they mesh with a person's preexisting beliefs about blacks.²⁸

Oliver found the image of the black male criminal is so ingrained that whites often mistakenly identify criminal suspects as blacks in crimes committed by whites.²⁹ In an analysis in which sixty undergraduate students were shown a newscast about a murder and a nonviolent crime, then evaluated for recall thirty days later, the most frequent error participants made was misbelieving the black committed the murder. In a

separate experiment, in which students read stories about violent and nonviolent crime committed by either a black or white suspect, Oliver found that black men were misidentified more frequently in stories about violent crime than nonviolent crime.³⁰ In contrast, white men were more frequently misidentified in nonviolent rather than violent crime stories. Although Oliver noted the sterile, kept environment of experiments bears little resemblance to the context in which people generally read news stories, she added the chilling note that “the manner in which viewers mistakenly remember race and crime information can result in a heightened possibility that *any* black man can be mistakenly identified as a criminal.”³¹

Racial stereotypes have real-world consequences. Peffley, Shields, and Williams found that even a short exposure to a black man in handcuffs can activate the black criminal stereotype: a belief that black suspects are more likely to be criminals, guilty of committing the crimes for which they are charged, and deserving of stiffer sentences than white suspects charged with identical crimes.³² It also invokes feelings of fear and loathing of blacks.

In summary, priming studies show that by making some aspects of an issue more salient, the media can shape the public’s perception about an issue. As the dominant lens through which most Americans view the world, these images can prime people’s perception of blacks. Cognitive research shows that once primed, stereotypical beliefs are activated more quickly and are more likely to cause people to view blacks along stereotypical lines. Hence, media messages matter as they prime racial stereotypes, most notably conflating blackness with criminality, and present the idea that crime is an inherent trait of blacks.

Countering media messages. Fujioka found that reality tends to offset racial stereotypes.³³ Specifically, people who have firsthand experience with blacks are more likely to believe what they have experienced than what the media report. In her analysis, she compared the perceptions of Asians spending their first year in the United States, who had little or no experience with blacks, to those of whites, who theoretically had a cadre of life experiences from which to craft their racial beliefs. She found that Asians, having only learned about blacks from the media, had less favorable opinions of blacks than did whites. She surmised that as the predominant way in which Asians learned about blacks, the abundance of negative messages from the media lowered newly arrived Asians’ opinions about blacks.

Scholars have also examined the effectiveness that positive priming and racial exemplars (i.e., Will Smith or Oprah Winfrey) have on race perception. Power, Murphy, and Coover found that priming audiences with positive information caused many to rate blacks as innocent victims of their circumstance or to attribute external causes for the situations in which they found themselves.³⁴ Dasgupta and Greenwald compared the effect well-known positive blacks (e.g., Denzel Washington), generally disliked blacks (e.g., Mike Tyson), well-liked whites (e.g., Tom Hanks), and disliked whites (e.g., Jeffrey Dahmer) have on race perception.³⁵ They found that whites had more positive opinions about blacks when primed with positive images than when primed with nonracial, pro-white, or negative images about blacks.

Bodenhausen, Schwarz, Bless, and Wänke, however, found exemplars played a role in what some scholars call "Enlightened Racism."³⁶ In short they found that exemplars like the fictitious Huxtable family on *The Cosby Show* create the sense in whites that "anyone can make it" if they try hard enough. However, this also conjures up the image that those blacks who do not "make it" fail mainly due to their personal failings rather than societal problems such as discrimination.

Media literacy can also alter race perception. In comparing how media affect the perception of blacks and Asian Indians, Ramasubramanian and Oliver found that training audiences to be critical of the media's ability to shape their perception of reality caused viewers to be less harsh in their assessment of Asian Indians, but not blacks.³⁷ They concluded that counter-stereotypes are not always effective and that perhaps anti-black sentiment is so ingrained that mere exposure to counter-stereotypical information is not enough to erase racial prejudices.

In summary, research on counter-stereotypes suggests race perceptions can be altered. Reality can offset stereotypes as people with firsthand experience with blacks have more positive opinions about blacks than those whose perceptions were shaped primarily by the media. Training audiences to be critical of media messages can also lessen stereotype endorsement. Priming audiences, however, with a continual stream of negative messages can lead to stereotypical beliefs about blacks. This analysis now examines what types of stories are most effective in countering those beliefs.

Hypotheses

Prior research has shown that Caucasians are consistently perceived more favorably than blacks.³⁸ Blacks, if depicted at all in media, are often covered for their connection to crime.³⁹ Thus, it is hypothesized that,

H1: White suspects in a story about crime will be perceived more favorably than black suspects, regardless of story type.

Previous studies have shown that priming participants with positive exemplars, or idealized racial types, can modify preexisting negative perceptions.⁴⁰ This logically suggests that a counter-stereotype that directly addresses the subject matter presented by the media would be more effective in changing people's perception than a counter-stereotype in general. Hence, it is hypothesized that,

H2: Suspects in the crime-related counter-stereotype condition will be perceived more favorably than those in the non-crime-related counter-stereotype condition or the no counter-stereotype condition.

Counter-stereotypes have been proven effective in changing perceptions of blacks, when compared to Asian Indians.⁴¹ However, previous research has found that even with media literacy training and counter-stereotypical messages, blacks are still more despised than whites.⁴² Thus, it is hypothesized that, even with counter-stereotypes,

Table 1. Experimental Conditions and Story Descriptions

	Type of story			
No CS-BK: No-counter-stereotype: black	Neutral	Violent crime—black suspect	Neutral	Neutral
NCRCS-BK: Non-crime-related counter-stereotype: black	Neutral	Violent crime—black suspect	Neutral	Counter-stereotype story about black exemplar is NOT crime-related
CRCS-BK: Crime-related counter-stereotype: black	Neutral	Violent crime—black suspect	Neutral	Counter-stereotype story about black exemplar that IS crime-related
No CS-white: No counter-stereotype: white	Neutral	Violent crime—white suspect	Neutral	Neutral
NCRCS-white: Non-crime-related counter-stereotype: white	Neutral	Violent crime—white suspect	Neutral	Counter-stereotype story about white exemplar that is NOT crime-related
CRCS-white: Crime-related counter-stereotype story: white	Neutral	Violent crime—white suspect	Neutral	Counter-stereotype story about white exemplar that IS crime-related

H3: White suspects will be perceived more favorably than black suspects in all counter-stereotype conditions.

Method

Purpose and Design

In examining which types of stories are most effective in ameliorating racial stereotypes, this analysis aims, first, to determine if race affects participants' perception of criminals; second, to determine what, if any, type of counter-stereotypical information—crime-related or non-crime-related—is most effective in offsetting racial stereotypes; and third, to determine if counter-stereotypical information is more effective in altering opinions about black or white criminal suspects. A 2 (race of suspect: black or white) \times 3 (type of counter-stereotype: crime-related, non-crime-related, or no counter-stereotype) factorial design was used to analyze the data.

Participants. A total of 150 subjects were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions (see Table 1). Of the participants, 126 were Caucasian/white, 7 were black, 7 were Asian/Asian-American/Pacific Islanders, 6 were Hispanic, and 1 person was "other" (black and Caucasian). The results for 3 participants could not be used in the

final analysis because of their failure to complete the questionnaire. In each condition, subjects read four stories that were presented in random order to control for order effects.

Independent Variables

Race. A picture of a biracial (black and Caucasian) male was digitally altered using Photoshop to make him appear either black or white in the crime stories. In addition to the picture, the race of the suspect was also manipulated in the crime story, with the suspect being described as black in stories with a photo of a black suspect and Caucasian in stories that included a picture of a white suspect. All crime stories were identical, save the race of the suspect.⁴³

The manipulation check determined 97.3% of participants correctly identified the suspect as black, and 95.9% correctly identified the suspect as white in the crime story, $\chi^2(3, N = 149) = 142.39, p < .01$.

Stimulus Materials

The stories. Every study participant read a crime story. All participants, except those in the no counter-stereotype condition, then read a counter-stereotype story. The crime stories were identical, except for the race of the suspect. The suspect in the crime story was described as a twenty-seven-year-old (either black or Caucasian, depending on race condition) male who robbed a Chicago liquor store, making off with more than \$2,500 in cash. In the process of the robbery, the suspect is alleged to have punched a store clerk in the head before rummaging through the cash registers behind the counter. After being shot with a stun gun by the store's security guard, he then charged and knocked the security guard to the ground while escaping the liquor store.

The crime-related counter-stereotype story focused on a convict who had turned his life around and became a productive member of his community. The non-crime-related counter-stereotype story was a good-news story that did not focus on crime.

Two to three neutral stories (depending on counter-stereotype condition) were included in this analysis to hide the overall goal of the experiment.

Counter-stereotypes. There were three levels of counter-stereotypes: crime-related (CRCS), non-crime-related (NCRCS), and no counter-stereotype (No CS). In the first level (CRCS), participants read a crime-related counter-stereotype story that was about either a black or Caucasian (depending on race condition) former convict who, after a life of crime and serving several years in a state correctional facility, turned his life around by starting a new business that keeps him and other inmates from returning to prison. In the second level (NCRCS), participants read a non-crime-related counter-stereotype story about an inner-city black or Caucasian (depending on race condition) who overcame the odds by earning an Ivy League degree and starting a business in his hometown. In the third level (No CS), participants did not read a counter-stereotype story, but instead read a neutral story having nothing to do with crime. The neutral

Table 2. Varimax-Rotated Factor Solution for the Dependent Variables

Dependent variables	Index 1: Concern about Crime	Index 2: Participants' Beliefs about Why Criminals Commit Crime
I feel safer knowing the police captured the robbery suspect	.868	-.069
The suspect being captured makes me feel better about how my taxes are spent	.761	.098
The liquor store robbery causes me to feel more concerned about my personal safety	.650	.040
The suspect committed the crime	.625	.331
Single parenting leads to crime	.037	.754
In general, criminals are less educated	-.102	.745
The liquor store robbery suspect is hostile	.265	.542
The suspect is likely to commit more violent crimes in the future	.509	.541

Figures in bold indicate to which Index each dependent variable belongs.

stories dealt with neither race nor crime and were controlled for length, each being approximately one page long, the same as the crime and race stories.

Dependent Variables

The items. The dependent variables were participants' personal concern about crime and the reasons participants believed criminals committed crime. The dependent variables were operationalized by a list of forty-four questions, twenty-one of which dealt specifically with participants' perceptions of criminals and their thoughts about the reasons people commit crime. Three items dealt with participants' perception of their personal safety. There were three open-ended questions. The remaining questions asked about the neutral stories. They were added to hide the intent of the study. Participants gave their opinions on a questionnaire about the suspects on a 5-point scale—with the polar opposites of *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*—immediately after reading all four stories. To analyze the data, *strongly disagree* was coded as 1; *disagree*, 2; *neither agree nor disagree*, 3; *agree*, 4; and *strongly agree*, 5.⁴⁴

Creating indexes. Principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation was used to create indexes to make the dependent variables less susceptible to the fluctuations caused by a single variable.⁴⁵ The factor analysis, with rotated component matrix for better fit, revealed the items composing the dependent variables clustered largely along two underlying dimensions. The first was defined as *participants' personal concern about crime*. The second index was defined as *participants' beliefs about why criminals commit crime* (see Table 2). Both measure the attitudes primed by white and black criminal suspects.

The dependent variables that compose the Concern about Crime Index may have clustered together because each item addresses participants' fear of criminals; for example, "The liquor store robbery caused me to be more concerned about my personal safety" is an item scholars suggest is directly related to crime coverage.⁴⁶ The questions composing the Beliefs about Crime Causes Index may have clustered together because both items composing the index measure potential reasons for criminal behavior, as some scholars have found audiences believe family environment and education are related to criminality.⁴⁷

The items "the criminal is hostile" and "the criminal will commit future crimes" were conceptually distinct, as they spoke to the mind-set of and actions by criminals, rather than study participants' perception of the suspect, which was the goal of this analysis. Furthermore, neither loaded highly on either index. Thus, they were not used in the analysis.

Cronbach's alpha was computed to measure internal consistency of the first index. The alpha value was .75 for Concern about Crime. A correlation was used to measure reliability for the second index because it contained only two items. The analysis revealed that the items were significantly correlated ($r = .42, p < .001$).

A MANOVA was used to test the hypotheses.

Pretests. Three pretests were conducted on fifty-five undergraduate students (fifty whites, three Asians, and two blacks)⁴⁸ to determine the power of the stimuli, the clarity of the questionnaire, the clarity of the stories, and how long it took participants to complete the questionnaire. Although statistical analysis on such a small group can be specious, a *t*-test showed participants felt safer that the black suspect was captured. In addition, several participants selected the ambiguous *neither agree nor disagree* option on the pretests. Thus, the final questionnaire was changed from a 5-point scale to a 7-point numeric scale with bipolar opposites of 1 symbolizing *strongly agree* and 7 symbolizing *strongly disagree* in hopes of increasing the variance of participants' responses.⁴⁹ The questionnaire was also shortened from forty-one to twenty-six questions as the pretest survey took participants up to twenty-five minutes to complete.

Procedure for the actual experiment. The final analysis was conducted on 150 undergraduate journalism students in an introductory-level course. Each was paid \$5 for participation in the experiment, which lasted approximately fifteen minutes. A white proctor conducted the experiment to better control for social desirability answers and to better hide the actual intent of the study.⁵⁰ Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions: No CS–black, CRCS–black, NCRCS–black, No CS–white, CRCS–white, and NCRCS–white. They were told the purpose of the analysis was to gauge their opinion on issues covered in the media and to measure their ability to recall what they read.

Results

The experiment was conducted using a 2 (race of suspect in story: black or white) × 3 (type of counter-stereotype: crime-related, non-crime-related, or no counter-stereotype) factorial design.

Table 3. Mean Response on Dependent Variables by Race of Suspect and Story Condition

	Concern about Crime						Beliefs about Crime Causes					
	Black		White		Totals		Black		White		Totals	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
CRCS: Crime-related counter-stereotype	2.89	1.1	3.29	1.2	3.13	1.1	4.00	1.6	3.57	1.2	3.73	1.5
NCRCS: Non-crime-related	2.70	0.69	2.99	1.0	2.85*	0.88	3.46	1.2	4.04	1.2	3.75	1.2
NCS: No counter-stereotype	3.32	1.1	3.23	1.3	3.28*	1.2	3.36	1.2	3.38	1.2	3.37	1.4

*Pairwise differences are significant using the Tukey test, $p < .01$.

H1: White suspects will be perceived more favorably than blacks.

This hypothesis was not supported. The MANOVA did not reveal a main effect for race: Wilks's $\Lambda = .99$, $F(2, 116) = 0.45$, $p = .641$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

H2: The crime-related counter-stereotype will be most effective in changing the opinion of audiences.

This hypothesis was partially supported. A two-way MANOVA revealed a significant main effect for the counter-stereotype condition, Wilks's $\Lambda = .91$, $F(4, 232) = 2.75$, $p = .029$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. The univariate tests found a main effect for counter-stereotype condition for Concern about Crime, $F(2, 122) = 4.906$, $p = .009$, but not for Beliefs about Crime Causes, $F(2, 122) = 0.668$, *ns*. Tukey's HSD post hoc revealed that for Concern about Crime, study participants had a significantly more favorable opinion of the suspect in the non-crime-related counter-stereotype story ($M = 2.85$, $SE = 0.12$) than they did of the suspect in the no counter-stereotype condition ($M = 3.28$, $SE = 0.17$). This hypothesis was partially supported, as the level of counter-stereotype was found to be significant, but not in the order predicted (CRCS > NCRCS > No CS). Specifically, the suspect in the NCRCS story was perceived as the most favorable, followed by the suspect in the CRCS story, then the suspect in the no counter-stereotype story. However, only the differences between non-crime-related and no counter-stereotype stories were found to be significant (see Table 3).

H3: White suspects will be perceived most favorably across all conditions.

The MANOVA did not find a significant interaction between race and counter-stereotype condition: Wilks's $\Lambda = .961$, $F(4, 222) = 1.15$, *ns*, $\eta_p^2 = .019$.

Discussion

This analysis examined what types of stories (crime-related, non-crime-related, or no counter-stereotype) are most effective in mitigating racial stereotypes. Priming served as the theoretical framework for this analysis because expansive research shows that racial stereotypes are often primed by media portrayals.⁵¹

Contrary to **H1**, this analysis did not find a main effect for race, meaning the race of the criminal suspects did not have an effect on how they were perceived by study participants. Several explanations may explain this finding, or lack thereof. First, and foremost, may be that this experiment was conducted using college students. Although their opinions are multifaceted,⁵² college students have also been shown to be more racially accommodating than the general public. A second reason might be because the study was conducted on journalism students. As Lippmann opined almost a century ago, reality as covered by the media is a distortion.⁵³ Journalism students, familiar with this fact, might have been less likely than other groups to form stereotypes from media messages.

This investigation did find a significant difference in the effect of counter-stereotypes, but not in the order predicted by **H2** (CRCS > NCRCS > No CS). This difference was significant for Concern about Crime, but not for Beliefs about Crime Causes.

This finding may reflect the fact that the crime-related counter-stereotype primed the idea of criminality twice. That is to say that, although this person turned his life around, spotlighting his criminal past in the story did not alter the audience's perception that this person had *still* been a criminal. Moreover, this might speak to the fact that once primed, the idea of criminality leaves such an obdurate stain in audiences' minds that it is not easily overcome by one mere story that counters their preexisting beliefs. It further supports cognition research that finds that negative attitudes, once primed, can become activated by the mere presence of an object—in this case a criminal—that reminds them of that stereotype.⁵⁴ Furthermore, although it sought to counteract criminal stereotypes, this analysis may have, by priming crime twice, inadvertently underscored Allport's long-standing finding about the speed with which people rush to judgment: "Given a thimbleful of facts, we rush to make generalizations as large as a tub."⁵⁵ The no counter-stereotype story, unsurprisingly, was the least effective because it was simply a story about crime, and there was no attempt to change participants' perception.

This analysis is significant in that it presents an interesting possibility regarding the black criminal stereotype (BCS). Specifically, the nonfinding for race in altering audiences' perception suggests that for younger Americans, the concomitant dyad of the BCS—race and crime—is fueled more by crime than by race. This may be the first analysis to suggest this possibility.

Another significant finding is that media professionals' role in abating racial stereotypes might be easier than previously suggested.⁵⁶ It is argued here that media

should break from their age-old axiom of “if it bleeds, it leads.” Although media must still report on crime that will likely include blacks, media should also report more news that shows the positive side of humanity. Priming works in both the positive and the negative. According to research on mean world syndrome, the media’s perpetual predilection with crime projects the image that the world is a more violent place than it is in reality.⁵⁷ However, this analysis found that positive coverage causes audiences to be more attuned with the positive side of human nature. Hence, showing more positive news stories could cause audiences to have a more positive view of society and the people within it. In addition, these stories need not be race-specific. Because race was not found to be a significant predictor of perception, it is argued here that the effects of priming criminality may go beyond race; fear of criminals is a *human* fear, of all criminals, be they black or white. This may be one of few studies to uncover this possibility.

This effectiveness of the non-crime-related counter-stereotypes on different indexes could speak to the difference in what each index is measuring. The Concern about Crime Index measured subjects’ personal fear and anxiety regarding crime, areas in which participants might have felt they had some power to change and control. However, the Beliefs about Crime Causes Index asked about traits that were more endemic to criminals, over which participants had no control; thus, no level of counter-stereotype may have altered their perception.

H3, which predicted an interaction between race and level of counter-stereotype, was not supported. The lack of interaction could again reflect the population on which the study was conducted or possibly the fact that skin color carries less social stigma than in the past. The results from the 2008 presidential election are perhaps the best evidence of this explanation. Hence, counter-stereotypes are less effective in negating racial stereotypes on audiences who demonstrate less prejudice. Furthermore, white students have grown up in an era where expressing racist sentiments is (for the vast majority) no longer acceptable, and the mere act of responding to a race-related question triggers a seemingly autonomic noninsolent response to avoid conflict.⁵⁸

Limitations and Future Studies

A limitation of this study is that it was conducted on college students in a classroom, which bears no resemblance to their real social environment. Future analyses should be conducted on a wider range of participants more akin to the general populace to increase generalizability.

This analysis found that positive media messages—regardless of topic—could lessen the speed with which people form racial stereotypes. An interesting, and perhaps sad, aspect of this study is that its findings suggest a way to negate racial stereotypes is rather simplistic: showing positive news decreases people’s beliefs in media messages. Yet stereotypes endure. In fact, Peffley, Hurwitz, and Sniderman found that although a number of whites have positive feelings about blacks, as many as “one in every two openly endorses frankly negative characterizations of most blacks.”⁵⁹

Perhaps a future study could discern why—despite all the gains made by blacks—such negative coverage remains. Getting to the root of that issue may get to the genesis of how stereotypes are promulgated. The findings from that study may yield significant results for both society and the academy.

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Notes

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