The Social Construction of the African American Family on Broadcast Television: A Comparative Analysis of *The Cosby Show* and *Blackish*

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ABSTRACT

This work analyzes the social construction of the African American family on primetime broadcast television. A textual analysis was conducted on two scripted television shows, *The Cosby Show* and *Blackish*. The analysis reveals similarities among both shows, which include well-rounded, educated family members that are representative of suburban, affluent minorities in America. However, differences including each broadcast shows' willingness to address racial inequality, stereotyping, racial tension in the workplace, and racial disparity in a multitude of familial situations is discussed. This analysis reveals how the African American family is constructed through primetime broadcast television and how that example has evolved over time. In addition to these comparisons, the portrayals of minorities in the current television landscape is compared to the characters of late 1980s and early 1990s and noticeably how the freedom to address race and equality (or lack thereof) honestly in situation comedies has evolved greatly within the last few decades.

The African American family has continuously come under attack as politicians and community leaders use rhetoric to dismantle progress and shift blame away from policies and discriminatory practices that place African Americans at a disadvantage. Discussions focused on absentee fathers, mothers working multiple jobs, and nontraditional parenting breaking apart the comfortable nucleus of Christian values and upbringings have controlled the narrative for decades. This constant barrage of negativity leaves other races to embrace the idea that the African American family is filled with chaos. Very little is done to correct this narrative, however, entertainment media has produced content over the past two decades that portrays the African American family in a very different context.

Broadcast television has introduced viewers to African American households that celebrate multigenerational family members that present a new narrative that combats previous negative stereotypes. When firsthand knowledge is not present,

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media images have a great influence on consumer's awareness and realization about the world around them (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). Entertainment media is very influential in creating debate, discussion, and information about different groups, therefore, what exists in the public sphere is very influential as the African American community strives for balanced representation (Skogerbo, 1990).

Many studies indicate that nonminorities that do not interact with African Americans receive their information from media outlets, especially broadcast media (Stroman, Merritt, & Matabane, 1989). It is widely understood that television does not attempt to be socially responsible to its viewers (Cummings, 1988). However, the opportunity for this medium to showcase a realistic portrayal of African Americans, reversing the stigma and negative stereotypes surrounding this race, is very possible.

The purpose of this research is to examine how African American families are socially constructed within entertainment media, specifically broadcast television shows. Literature exists that discusses the rigid path that African American entertainers have endured in the type of roles and storylines they portray on television. Also, research exists that discusses the portrayal of African Americans on news programming, but the conversation surrounding specific television programming and the social constructs that are created is lacking within media research.

The significance of this study is steeped in the fact that research has shown that viewers are prone to believing television portrayals as real and true to form, and television serves as a knowledge gap for viewers who have not had first-hand experience with another race (Ford, 1997). Broadcast media possess a great deal of power and influence and its reach is exceedingly broader than most other forms of media. Broadcast media has the power to educate and influence viewers and a great potential to change viewer's ideas (Stroman et al., 1989).

In this research, a textual analysis focused on the social construction of the African American family on primetime broadcast television shows, *Blackish* and *The Cosby Show*, is introduced. This research provides insight into the content that is being transmitted through television screens to audience members about race relations, classism, and family dynamics. This research will address a neglected question: How are African American families socially construction on these specific broadcast shows? These findings present data that seemingly distorts the conversation about broken African American families and presents the potential to redefine the narrative that has generalized African American families in the United States.

Literature review

Labels, identity, and social construction

A person is labeled African American because society creates and reinforces the social construct, not because there was a choice in the matter (Flores, 2012). The stereotypes and expectations of African Americans are also prescribed by society and, thus, reinforced by those same hegemonic powers over and over again (Omi & Winant, 1994). The media is a main influencer in these social constructions,

therefore examining its contribution allows for a richer understanding. Labels unfortunately introduce stereotypes, which can be viewed as negative or positive. Both stereotypes have the potential to be problematic as they create generalizations. The African American family characterized as broken and substandard, as a generalization, is unfair and unjust. This narrative allows Christian leaders to draw on sympathy from communities, push shame throughout neighborhoods, and draw followers closer to a "higher being." Politicians are able to embrace this description to seemingly propose what is wrong with African American communities and why their political policies are necessary to correct or dismantle a way of life that most have not, and will never experience personally.

On the other hand, positive stereotypes also present a complicated scenario. The "model African American" placates to white fear. This creation allows the disruption of policies and government programs that were created to aid communities in need. Generalizing all African Americans as the same and pushing a notion that everyone can succeed if they work hard dismisses the truth that many lack access to education, wealth accumulation, and/or community support.

Stuart Hall (2007), whose many influences and theoretical ideologies encompass identity, representation, and social construction, discussed how identity is not solely inside an individual but is affected by connectedness to society (cited in MacCabe, 2008). There is not one specific culture that is superior to another. The identity that one draws from their culture, social circle, and community should not be dismissed by societal labels and social constructs that have been created and reinforced by external forces, namely media. The social make-up and portrayal of the African American family in the media have been ridiculed and torn apart as many contributors within this medium are nonminorities (Fujioka, 1999). Specifically in entertainment media, the depiction of the African American family have been skewed to fit what is considered comfortable and safe for viewers rather than showcasing realistic characters. The Black public sphere is one that consists of a multitude of classes, social economic statuses, ethnic backgrounds, and locales from all across the globe (Squires, 2002). This diversity, even among African Americans, was missing in its entirety from television screens for years.

Stuart Hall's theoretical framework examining the social construction of race and ethnicity within media presents the foundation of this research. Hall's focus on the social, cultural, and economic relations with regards to identity construction is key in understanding what is reality for communities and the potential for false portrayals (Alexander, 2009). Hall (1967) stated that "race is a collective concept" (p. 194) and that the exchanges between those individuals or groups stem from the attitudes and beliefs that resonates within their identity (Alexander, 2009). The richness that results from interaction is what dictates identity and the identifiers that make-up the African American family. What is concocted by media might not align with these concepts and this can be problematic.

Hall (1996) presented the idea that identity is a narrative that can be constructed by whomever is at the helm. These identities are constructed and have impact at the given moment they are created and affect the viewer or consumer (Alexander,

2009). This relationship between the construction of African American families, the entities that control and disseminate this message, and the consumers are central to this research. When entertainment media projects images of the African American family and those characters and story lines are uniquely diverse, presenting a multitude of situations and circumstances that are relatable to the public at-large, something real happens. Stereotypes are challenged, knowledge becomes universal, and discourse becomes prominent in circles where at times it did not exists and was considered taboo.

Hall's work with identity and the social construction of minorities is vast. This research adopts a portion of that framework and applies it in a way that examines how culture and identity can be presented and helpful to a society that may lean heavily on entertainment media as a source of exposure to minorities when direct one-on-one encounters is lacking. According to Hall, the role of theory should supply a way of engaging in questions and pushing for a deeper understanding rather than striving towards an established endpoint (Alexander, 2009).

African Americans as Black Americans

This research is solely focused on African Americans and the distinction between African Americans and other Black minorities is imperative. African Americans are in fact Black, however not all Black people are considered African American. There are a multitude of Black Americans that benefit and fall victim to the stereotypes that identity and social constructs create. Considering other cultures and ethnicities such as Jamaicans, Haitians, British, and countless others, which can all be considered Black, embrace a universal truth. One is that they share the same race; however, ethnicity is associated with culture and this is where the differences exists. Many nonminorities executives in mainstream media do not differentiate between Black ethnicities and cultural practices in producing television programming. Also most audience members who do not identify as one of these Black ethnicities most often do not acknowledge or realize differences.

For the purpose of this research, African Americans and the African American family will be analyzed. The term *African American*, which for some, is interchangeable with *Black American*, refers to Black people whose lineage is tied to America usually through slavery. Where Haitian Americans or Jamaican Americans can trace their heritage to specific countries, many African or Black Americans have deep roots within the United States and because of slavery may lack the opportunity to trace their history prior to slavery. This research, for the sake of clarity and purpose, addresses the African American family.

The history of African Americans on TV

Prior to the 1960s the roles of "coon," "baffoon," and "pickaninnies" were dominant among African American characters on television, which created a stereotype labeling them as a loud and conniving race (Cummings, 1988). Many of these roles in television continued throughout the 1960s and as the civil rights movement gained

traction, the 1970s showed minor improvements in their portrayal on television (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). By the 1980s comedic television was an arena where African Americans were on equal footing with their nonminority counterparts, but dramatic series still lacked diversity. The 1980s were treated as a renaissance for African Americans on the small screen as the characters held occupations that varied, including policeman, attorneys, business owners, and doctors, and their behaviors steered away from cartoonish antics (Atkin, 1992). The 1990s opened doors for African Americans to take on diverse roles in comedies and dramas, but the amount of content varied from television season to television season, at times leaving the landscape completely devoid without predominately African American television shows on the air.

As time progressed and characters began to show more diversity, television continued to avoid real issues that the African American community faced, including social, economical, and political issues. Television programming at times can support the notion that real-world issues did not affect the African American community. Television has the power to shift cultural norms, educate audience members, and change negative stereotypes. However, the hegemonic structure that creates and operates broadcast media has to make this a priority. Considering that power is made up of White males who serve as decisions makers who are far removed from these settings, a lack of a balanced representation, due to the lack of exposure, is very possible. How African Americans are perceived by nonminorities and within their own race is important considering television's strong influence on audience members (Stroman et al., 1989). Because media outlets, such as television, cultivate reality for the masses, what is put on the small screen can have a lasting effect (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008).

Stereotypes of African Americans on TV

Stereotypes are a set of beliefs about a group concerning specific characteristics or attributes that may or may not be true. Stereotypes are not always negative, but when they are they can damage and victimize groups, and in turn create distance and inferiority among individuals, especially when the dominant or hegemonic power is the one presenting these ideas (Fujioka, 1999). This damage happens when viewers do not have first-hand experiences with the mentioned social group or race. It is imperative that viewers understand what is realistic and what is dramatized and from whom the portrayal comes from. Being entertained at the expense of an entire race does damage to the viewer as ignorance can be hurtful when displayed in real world situations, and what is shown on television puts the victims in a compromising situation as they must work against messaging that they cannot control or prevent.

Labeling African Americans as funny, nonsexual characters allows mainstream nonminority viewers to see a race as entertaining and less aggressive (R. Hall, 1993). There are numerous media outlets that present the African American family to viewers across the United States. Platforms such as reality shows, scripted comedies and dramas, and news programming all play a key role in how families are represented in media. However, the truth is often times curtailed as it conflicts with revenue and the goal of showcasing sensationalized drama.

However, in the 1980s there was a shift to include African Americans having a diverse range of employment and multi-dimensional portrayals on television (Atkin, 1992). This shift allowed for a medium as popular as television to introduce diverse images of African Americans and the African American family. Today families includes a wide range of types including single mothers, two parent households, and many variations in-between. True to real life, broadcast television is beginning to showcase minorities in a way that could reverse the stereotypes that many viewers witness on television years ago.

News portrayals of African Americans

It is worth mentioning the contribution of news programming in establishing the social construct of African Americans. Although this research is solely focused on scripted television programming, to avoid the news and its influence would leave a gaping hole in how families are constructed. Television, versus print and film, is one of the most intimate and personal media forms (R. Hall, 1993). Its authority on individuals carries weight as it is most accessible and reaches more viewers that most media outlets.

The news media provides daily, if not hourly, visuals and written messages of African Americans and the African American family and provides a great deal of content for viewers to learn about this race (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). This can potentially combat positive portrayals of African Americans as most television shows only air once per week compared to the news cycle, which is aired throughout the day. Research shows that African Americans are commonly portrayed as poor, perpetrators of crime, and victims of violence from their own communities (Busselle & Crandall, 2002). In addition, studies have been conducted that states viewers who consume a larger amount of news programming are more likely to view African Americans as living in less affluent conditions compared to other races (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). These statistics damage the reality that African Americans, like all other races, are multidimensional. Research shows that only 8% of African American two-parent households live below the poverty line (BlackDemographics.com, 2014); however the focus on poor African American families is in constant rotation in news programming.

According to Gans (1979), news reporters receive their information from what they read daily, their peers, friends, family members, and from sources they typically use. Looking at the portrayal of African Americans in mainstream news would indicate that the depiction is presented mostly from nonminorities' perspectives. Balanced news produces a variety of stories that will hold an audience members attention, no matter their race, however this is not a major focus for mainstream news outlets (Gans, 1979). As an entire race, there are wealthy, poor, and middle-class African Americans. However, poor African Americans are overrepresented in the news compared to other lower socioeconomic individuals from other races (Busselle & Crandall, 2002). Many people understand welfare and government financial support programs to be an African American issue, however research states that White American welfare recipients make up 40.2% of the total, compared

to only 25.7% of African Americans (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2015). However, the news depicts a very different narrative. According to the National Center for Education Statics, in 2009–2010 African Americans receiving college degrees increased by 89%, 53%, and 109% for associates, bachelors, and masters degrees, respectively. The truth in African American wealth and education is ignored in news reporting. It is expected, because of what is distributed, that heavy news viewers will believe that African Americans are worse off compared to other races (Busselle & Crandall, 2002).

Currently, scripted television offers a diverse representation of the African American family and thanks to cable, the options are constantly growing. This is combative of news reporting and it's a welcomed change in the attempt to present diverse portrayals. African Americans and the African American family are mostly portrayed in situation comedies versus dramas (Busselle & Crandall, 2002). Because of this, a larger concentration of this study will focus on situation comedies as they offer evidence to examine what exists with regard to the social construction of the African American family.

Methodology

For this research a qualitative cultural studies approach examining broadcast media, specifically the African American television shows, *The Cosby Show* and *Blackish*, was conducted. The social construction of the African American family on these primetime network shows will be explored to better understand how viewers understand this race and themselves (regardless of their specific race) co-existing. Media is credited with illustrating how society functions and many viewers see reality and media images as the same thing (Bussell & Crandall, 2002).

Using a qualitative textual analysis, six episodes of each broadcast television show, *The Cosby Show* and *Blackish*, were selected. Each show was chosen by adding the total number of episodes that aired on television and using a specific divisor to create random selection. Each episode used for this research was selected based off of where the divisor landed among the total number of episodes. This method was used to ensure a diverse sample from each scripted series. *The Cosby Show* aired 201 episodes, over the course of eight seasons, and *Blackish*, which premiered in the fall of 2014, had 16 shows that aired during the course of this research; all episodes were a part of its first season. The purpose, specifically for this research, was to pull a sample of all aired programming, and six episodes provided a strong sample, as the findings could potentially have been skewed if all episodes of each show were used. *The Cosby Show* aired 201 episodes, however, to stay consistent, six shows were chosen. Collectively over 132 minutes of each series was analyzed for this research.

The content of each show was examined based off of several factors: the social make-up of each family, the situations and themes presented, and the approaches to addressing racism and social economic status. In addition to this examination, noticeable differences among each show are compared to illustrate how each portrayed the African American family and their engagement with their surrounding

community and potential influence on viewers. The focus of this research is not on producing evidence of specific images, but gaining a richer understanding of the media's portrayal of the African American family. As a tool that bridges the knowledge gap, information and entertainment go hand-in-hand with regards to educating communities (Atkin, 1992). This research aims at contributing to that discussion.

Findings

Social construction is how society, usually the hegemonic power structure, labels individuals and in doing so, creates a hierarchy of social groups. The social class and social standing of an individual is based on the identities they align themselves with and how they are perceived by others. These constructs are created by an individual's interpretations and their perceived knowledge of social groups. For these concepts to exist and their labels to be maintained, they must be reaffirmed, media is influential in creating this pattern.

Similarities between each show

The Cosby Show and *Blackish* are both primetime situation comedies that aired on NBC and ABC, respectively. Both shows showcase an affluent African American family, in a dual-parent household with multiple children. *The Cosby Show* aired from 1984 until 1992 and *Blackish*, which is currently on the air, began its broadcast run in 2014.

There are several similarities between both shows. In *The Cosby Show*, the parents worked as a doctor and lawyer and in *Blackish* the parents work as a marketing executive and doctor. Both shows created an atmosphere where African Americans are educated, work full-time careers, and are actively involved in parenting their children. These portrayals were not common in television prior to the 1980s and for many, are not a part of the "normal" landscape when considering minority stereotypes. Both shows present images that oppose stereotypes, illustrating how family structures communicate and operate in a society where everyone is on equal footing. These moments created on each show offer the opportunity for viewers to see African American families as an equitable entity, similar to any family, in any community, no matter their race.

The social construction of these families portrayed a balanced representation and fair assessment of what you might see in a suburban or upscale neighborhood where an African American family might live. For many, this may be the first introduction to African Americans and the African American family within this setting. In the pilot episode of *Blackish* (Barris & Griffiths, 2014), the family is identified as the "mythical and majestical black family in a suburban neighborhood" (Griffiths, 2014). The remark is made from a comedic point-of-view, but the message states that this is not common, especially on broadcast television.

Each show has a cast of characters that not only includes a mother, father, and several children, but also extended relatives including grandparents. In Episode 17,

Season 3, of *The Cosby Show*, titled "Calling Dr. Huxtable," the grandfather of the patriarch works alongside his daughter-in-law, jokes with his son, and is actively engaged with his family. Extended family members exists in the lives of the immediate family members and there is an emphasis on generational influence.

Within the pilots of both television shows, there was a focus on occupations and social status. In addition to each parent of both shows mentioning what they do for a living, or scenes taking place at their specific place of employment, there were illustrations of various professional roles in the workplace. In the pilot episode of *Blackish*, the main character, Andre, walks through the hallway of his place of employment, and through a voiceover, discusses that when one African American breaks through the glass ceiling, everyone who is African American celebrates. Throughout this scene, he high-fives and fist-bumps the receptionist, janitor, and security guard, who are all African American. Also, in the pilot of *The Cosby Show* (Weinberger, Leeson, & Sandrich, 1984), the main character, Cliff, has a discussion with his son, Theo, talking about "regular" people. During this discussion Theo excludes his parents as "regular" people and defines regular occupations which includes gas station attendants and restaurant employees. Theo is justifying his grades and exploring how his goals are more focused towards living a "regular" lifestyle, inadvertently saying that his parents are of a higher social standing.

Lastly, both television shows make a point, in their premiere episode, to deliver a message to viewers regarding the importance of their social make-up, including their occupations and their traditional family structure. Characters express the importance of setting a good example. There is a seemingly conscious effort to emphasize the well-rounded African American family and to inform the viewer that through entertainment a constant focus on class, education, and community will be presented.

Differences between each show

There are differences between each show including the years when they were broadcasted on primetime television. *The Cosby Show* aired from 1984 until 1992, and more than 20 years later *Blackish* premiered in 2014. In addition, the networks that aired each of the shows; National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and American Broadcasting Company (ABC) debuted *The Cosby Show* and *Blackish*, respectively. The number of children in each household, the occupations of the parents, and other minute details differed but these items did not affect the research focused on examining the social construction of these characters.

However, there is a major difference between the two shows that is worth discussion. *The Cosby Show* has been hailed as groundbreaking in increasing the awareness of professional, affluent African Americans on television and its success prompted networks to see that minority programming can and does attract large numbers of viewers (Atkin, 1992). However, critics, specifically African American, have condemned the show stating that is was not urban enough and was simply a way to put White Americans at ease about racial issues because none ever exist on the show (Cummings, 1988). *The Cosby Show* created a space where race was not at

the forefront of their story lines and racial stereotypes rarely exist. This portrayal, as it presented a new narrative, was accused of placating to White fear and creating a space where racism was rarely seen.

The Cosby Show episodes were centered around family and were focused on presenting a slice of life; in other words, these are activities that families typically engage in and how they interact, rarely drawing attention to race. In episodes, "Cliff's Wet Adventure" (Markus, Finestra, & Sandwich, 1989) and "27 and Still Cooking" (Gartrelle, Leahy, & Barnette, 1991), the family, blended with generations of relatives and ex-spouses, gathered for Thanksgiving and to celebrate a wedding anniversary, respectively. There was nothing specifically related to the African American experience or specifically depicting cultural differences or race relations within these episodes. Nevertheless, these televised portrayals of this family and their interactions may still have impact on viewers. Watching the Cosby family celebrate life, enjoy one another's company, and interact without emphasizing stereotypes that mirror nightly news portrayals offer the opportunity to provide a difference perspective.

Blackish, on the other hand, took a direct approach to addressing race and social class. In almost every single episode viewed for this research, race and race relations was mentioned. In the episode, "Crazy Mom" (Lerner & Griffiths, 2014), topics such as African Americans having terrible credit compared to Whites and the discussion of minority musical influences being renamed and repackaged to fit White audiences were discussed. Also, in the *Blackish* episode, "Black Santa/White Christmas" (Lerner & Hegarty, 2014), several racial and ethnic-based characters discuss and question if African Americans could be considered racists. Asian Americans and Mexican Americans, and specific stereotypes attributed to each, are explored and characters discuss race openly with lines such as, "I don't see color … just kidding, I'm white" (Hegarty, 2014). For *Blackish*, race and class is consistently at the forefront of its storyline and character dialogue.

Blackish takes the African American family and utilizes family conflict and workplace interaction as a tool to create richer dialogue from different perspectives. The patriarch constantly discusses family and marital situations with his co-workers, the conflict that takes place within the family structure tends to carry into school and the workplace for family members, and this is a mirror image of what reality is for many viewers. *Blackish*, similar to *The Cosby Show*, is a family show, but it has managed to push the boundary into outside territories where nonfamily members interact and the impact of familial decisions and outcomes continue to take place.

In addition, the multigenerational interaction and parenting style differs among each show. *The Cosby Show* exhibited a deep appreciation and respect for its elders and the immediate parents, although not perfect, seemingly parented in a manner that was faultless. However, relationships among the family members of *Blackish* were perceived much differently. The grandparents, although respected as adults, are heavily flawed, which includes alcohol consumption, gambling, using profanity, and being sexually promiscuous. Also, the parents are open and honest about their

lack of parenting skills. Both of these aspects play into the comedic storytelling of each episode and storyline, but exist nonetheless.

Lastly, *Blackish* addresses interracial issues. Rainbow, the matriarch of the family, is biracial and topics including urban versus multiethnic African American cultures are discussed, stereotypes of multiethnic persons are presented, and interracial dating is also a part of the dialogue in the series. In the episode, "Parental Guidance" (Nickerson & Schultz, 2015), issues are discussed including stereotypes such as the eating habits of African Americans compared to multiracial persons. There are several scenes where characters banter back and forth about the racial stereotypes and the specific upbringing of each character.

The lack of racial dialogue in *The Cosby Show* and the immediate and constant reference to race and racial issues in *Blackish* may be contributed to a few things. One is the lapse in time between both shows. Could *The Cosby Show*, having premiered over 20 years earlier have addressed these issues and remained a success? Also, is the success of *The Cosby Show* one of the reasons why shows such as *Blackish* are able to push the boundaries of race relations in primetime broadcast? Both shows, by critics and viewers, are considered successful and have strong ratings: at their highest, *The Cosby Show* brought in over 34 million viewers and *Blackish* over 13 million (see www.nielson.com).

Connection between both shows

Each television show offered programming that reflected real life that can be seen in viewers of any race or ethnicity. In the episode, "Big Night, Big Fight," from the series *Blackish*, the main characters Rainbow and Dre were attempting to celebrate Valentine's Day and in a comedic fashion, everything that could possibly go wrong happened. The couple had an argument, refused to apologize, and in their stubbornness learned how important it is to communicate and forgive. These themes and lessons cross racial boundaries. Also, in the episode, "27 and Still Cooking," from *The Cosby Show*, the patriarch, Cliff plans a dinner to celebrate his and his wife's 27th wedding anniversary. Cliff recreates their first date at their home by hiring a calypso band, Jamaican chef, and his children decorate the dining room creating the atmosphere of the restaurant where they dined. Within this 22-min episode viewers witness relationship dynamics, families working together as a unit, and the organization and planning of a special event for a loved one. All themes and subjects that could transcend to any race or ethnicity.

These episodes may not make race or race relations a major plot point, but they offer the viewer two specific things. One, a chance to see minorities as a honest reflection of who they are in a suburban setting and not just as stereotypes. Two, the opportunity to create discussions about similarities in family structure, communication skills, relationships, and parenting. In doing so, shedding light on the idea that no matter the race, people experience a multitude of diverse encounters, activities, and life moments and these occurrences may overlap depending on

shared experiences. Understanding the social construction of the African American family through means of broadcast media allows participants to not only witness diverse portrayals, it also allows minorities and nonminorities to have open conversations about similarities and dissect what is normalcy when considering family dynamics.

Additional perspectives that these shows offered included moments within educational entertainment. Education entertainment, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation Issue Brief (2004), is a way of informing the public about social issues through entertainment mediums such as television programming. Television is a primary use for entertainment education and both shows that were analyzed for this research also presented entertainment education. In *The Cosby Show*'s episode "Calling Doctor Huxtable" (Auer & Sandrich, 1987) one of the main characters (Vanessa) has a friend over who wants to smoke in her bedroom. Vanessa is adamant about her not smoking but soon gives in and when the girls are caught by Vanessa's siblings they are lectured about the potential trouble they could be in and the side effects of smoking. Later in the episode Vanessa confesses to her father and is not punished, but rather engages in a discussion about smoking and why it is not healthy. Also, in an episode of *Blackish* titled, "Big Night, Big Fight," the children address one of their siblings about bullying and work with her to change her attitude and redirect her aggressive comments and actions. She is given exercises to help stay calm and is encouraged to exercise patience and restraint. During the episode the siblings talk about the importance of feelings and what happens when you hurt someone else's feelings by bullying them.

Neither show is focused or tasked with specifically providing positive characters or presenting story lines that deflect from the reality of negative aspects such as bullying, smoking, or even addressing negative stereotypes within the African American community. These characters are flawed in their own specific ways, they have insecurities, are learning how to manage their roles within their family, and they make mistakes. The research addresses how the social construction of these families are portrayed resulting in balanced, realistic portrayals of the African American family.

Discussion

The success of a show on network television is usually measured in its "cross-over" appeal. If a television show can draw in viewers in record numbers, it is a strong indication that those viewers are of different races and ethnic backgrounds, and access to such a diverse demographic appeals to advertisers and networks (Atkin, 1992). The acceptance of a television show with a minority casts as a cross-over success indicates great things for the landscape of television programming. Once the type of characters on television start to resemble the same type of people that viewers see in their daily lives a rich connection may happen. Every single race can take on different types of occupations, interact cohesively, and co-exist. For viewers who only witness other races from their television set, they now get to

witness diversity among people and also similarities in how other races interact, their family structure, and engage in their emotional and social encounters.

Unfortunately, this "cross-over" appeal that many networks and advertisers strive to obtain may also have negative consequences. Portrayals of affluent, middle-class minorities may give other races the idea that poverty and social issues no longer exists and in turn reinforce dominant the ideology that personal value is associated with social class and status (Stroman et. al., 1989). Also, these portrayals can validate some nonminority arguments including how affirmative action and welfare are no longer necessary. These ideas support notions of victimization and fails to acknowledge the injustices, lack of educational opportunities, and impoverish locales that affect some African Americans.

Years ago the social movements and growth of civil rights among African Americans were heavily captured solely by print media (Roberts & Klibanoff, 2008). Today we have the added luxury of broadcast media to inform and educate and it is a tool that deserves attention. Broadcast media, unlike digital and social media, is much more accessible to lower and working class individuals. Television has significant potential for promoting positive stereotypes and increasing the opportunity for engagement across race and ethnicities within the home and abroad.

This research presents specific ways broadcast media has constructed the affluent African American family. The families presented in this research have earned college degrees, are all a part of two-person, seemingly normative households, and their mishaps and comedic adventures fit nearly within a 22-min entertainment block. This research, even though it only highlights one depiction of the African American family, it is one that is not usually at the forefront nor celebrated in mainstream media. The significance is in the fact that African American families, like many other families, are educated, active within their family unit, and possess influential careers and prominent positions within society. Because that aspect is not celebrated enough in media, having a balanced representation of the African American family is vital.

Within the African American community class division and socioeconomic status is as diverse as any other race or ethnicity. The issues that the African American community faces, with regards to representation, is that the emphasis of the "welfare queen," "dead-beat dad," and misguided youth are constantly reinforced in news reporting and from government administrations. This research highlights a challenge to that narrative. Further consideration within research areas should be given to television programming that focuses on middle and working class depictions of African American families. However, this research is highlighting upper middle-class African Americans and the potential to disrupt some of the narratives that exists within mainstream media.

Past literature suggests that the promotion of minority-lead television programming has a direct link to advertisers and revenue opportunities (Atkin, 1992). This position, even though not centered on creating a diverse entertainment landscape or promoting inclusion within the entertainment industry, still provides an outlet to showcase African Americans in a positive light. Television depicts a likeness to everyday situations and real live events and thus has the potential to be the basis for

judgments such as creating racial stereotypes and attitudes (Fujioka, 1999). Portrayals of African Americans that reflect multicultural, reputable, and at times flawed individuals, opens up the opportunity for nonminorities to have exposure and for the African American community to embrace characters that span the reality of society.

Conclusion

The sample episodes used to explore the social construction of the African American family has offered a diverse and unique opportunity for continued discussion and exploration. These two families demonstrate real life, similar to most situational comedies, and in doing so have bridged the gap between African Americans and other races with regards to family structure, emotional and social well-being, and intercommunication with other races in diverse situations.

The findings presented here should be interpreted cautiously, recognizing the limitations of the sample. Several items have to be considered including the time difference between *The Cosby Show* and *Blackish* is over 22 years and the landscape of the world has changed. Also, *Blackish* is only in its first season and only 16 episodes were available for this research, compared to the 201 episodes for *The Cosby Show*. Lastly, the amount of shows that depict African Americans and African American families is vast and this sample only reflects two examples. Shows that showcase working-class families, single-parent households, and biracial families exists and were not used for this research. Continued research will add to a robust foundation for further dialogue and discovery into the representation of minority families and communities.

Also, additional research into dramatic scripted shows, reality shows, and competition shows would offer unique perspectives about the construction of African Americans and would be a great direction to continue this scope of exploration. The possibilities for future analysis into the social construction of minority families is endless and with so much material available and constantly being created, this is a conversation worthy of continued discussion. The goal of this research is about presenting questions, introducing an understanding of social constructs and its implications, and highlighting a diverse and essential image of African Americans.

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Appendix

Table of episodes used in research project

Show	Season	Episode number	Title
The Cosby Show	1	1	"Pilot"
The Cosby Show	2	10	"Claire's Toe"
The Cosby Show	3	17	"Calling Dr. Huxtable"
The Cosby Show	5	2	"The Physical"
The Cosby Show	6	8	"Cliff's Wet Adventure"
The Cosby Show	7	18	"27 and Still Cooking"
Blackish	1	1	"Pilot"
Blackish	1	4	"Crazy Mom"
Blackish	1	7	"The Gift of Hunger"
Blackish	1	10	"Black Santa/White Christmas"
Blackish	1	13	"Big Night, Big Fight"
Blackish	1	16	"Parental Guidance"