The Influence of Attitudes on Affirmative Action and Racial Identity on Judgments Involving Black Celebrity Defendants

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In a continuing project designed to explore the role of racial identity in determining reactions to racially charged, highly salient ("obtrusive") events, a structural equation model was developed that identified factors influencing the impact of (a) race and (b) media exposure patterns on perceptions of the guilt or innocence of an African American celebrity-athlete defendant. Included in the hypothesized model were attitudes toward affirmative action, the perceived reality of television, and perceptions of a "mean world." Undertaking a secondary analysis of public opinion data on the O. J. Simpson Murder case, we have "shuffled the race card" with a slim deck of alternative factors, eliminating race as a strong, direct causal agent. And, we have identified a number of ways in which media exposure serves as an important—yet indirect—predictor of attitudes towards African American celebrity-athletes.

KEYTERMS affirmative action, celebrity defendant, media effects, racial attitudes
Few media issues have generated as much persistent debate as the influence of racial images in the mass media. Coverage of civil trials involving defendants—ranging from O. J. Simpson (murder) to Kobe Bryant (rape)—fits into a series of prominent, thematically linked news holes that have rekindled debates about race, discrimination and fairness in the United States (e.g., Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Neuendorf, Atkin, Jeffres, Loszak, & Williams, 2000; Thaler, 1997; Ternstrom, 1996; Tucker, 1997; C. C. Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003).1

Aside from the obvious benefit of providing a case that can help dramatize race and crime in a readily recognizable fashion, an investigation of Black celebrity principals can help highlight key socio-demographic variables underpinning an investigation of racial and class divides uncovered in public opinion surveys. Although past work reveals a negative interaction between minority status and poverty—contributing, for instance, to perceptions of a menacing Black underclass (Gray, 1994, p. 176)—celebrity athletes present an interesting new wrinkle where class appears in a different light. In some respects, focusing on upscale Afro American celebrities can arguably help us disentangle any confounds stemming from the interaction of race and lower socioeconomic status in other analyses of crime reporting in this context (e.g., Dixon & Linz, 2000). Such work also highlights the influence of an emerging celebrity class, one to which audiences enjoy unprecedented access through formatted channels like Court TV and CNN.

Despite the widespread belief that blatant racism retreated following passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (e.g., W. J. Wilson, 1980), research suggests that stereotypical beliefs persist, although in subtle, implicit, or symbolic forms (e.g., Devine & Elliott, 2000; Sears & Henry, 2005; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997; C. C. Wilson et al., 2003; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997). Mass media represent an important source of information about minorities for many (e.g., Matabane, 1988; Fujioka, 2005; C. C. Wilson et al., 2003) and content analyses document that Blacks and Latinos are overrepresented in conjunction with such enduring stereotypical portrayals as that of lawbreaking aggressor (e.g., Dixon & Linz, 2000; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Oliver, 1994). These media portrayals, in turn, represent key contributors to the larger public perception about stereotyped groups (e.g., Brown-Givens & Monahan, 2005; Fujioka & Tan, 2003; Matabane, 1988).

Such coverage thus contributes to audience conceptions about race and race relations, including measures gauging support for more implicit forms of symbolic racism—i.e., that which is less overt—such as lack of support for measures assessing sensitivity to affirmative action and discrimination (e.g., Hernnstein & Murray, 1994; Neuendorf et al., 2000; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997; Tan & Fujioka, 2000). Since racism is now stigmatized and, perhaps consequently, expressed in more subtle forms, traditional measures of overt racism yield diminished returns (e.g., Krysan, 1998). Scholars (e.g., Tuch & Weitzer, 1997) advocate the development of measures based on less obtrusive response latencies or social desirability norms (i.e., those which enable...
the measurement of implicit stereotypes vis attitudes towards the police, affirmative action, etc.).

One opportunity to gauge implicit stereotypes involves the consideration of celebrity trials involving minorities, which are perhaps tailor-made as high-profile media events encompassing such “newsworthy” hot-button issues as domestic violence, class, victim’s rights, race relations and celebrity. As Thaler (1997, p. ix) noted of O. J. Simpson’s Trial of the century, a raft of media “carried the image and the word of the event across the globe, leaving behind an incredible trove of videotape and articles of the single most covered trial in American history.” The present study investigates how reactions to such cases are related to media coverage, including the corollary influence of attitudes concerning the pervasiveness of discrimination and support for affirmative action. In particular, we propose and test an affective model of judicial reasoning with media use as a predictor in the decision making process, with attitudes toward African Americans, toward civil rights and like issues serving as mediating variables.

BACKGROUND

In this information environment rich with high-profile cases related to equity for African Americans, scholars underscore the role of race in the formulation of an observer’s interpretations of such events (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2006; Davis & Gandy, 1999). For instance, initial observations about the Simpson criminal case indicated that race was a paramount issue: Gallup poll data found that over 70% of White Americans believed Simpson to be guilty, compared with only 12% of African Americans (Newport, 1995). In a rare attempt to probe the basis for this difference, another Gallup poll taken during the trial found that 66% of African Americans thought that the U.S. justice system is biased against Blacks (Saad & McAneny, 1995).

When examining differences in information processing across races, it’s important to realize that reporting on defendants like O. J. Simpson or Kobe Bryant represents a special case, one involving celebrities and a sensational trial with significant racial elements—all furthering public interest in the proceeding and accounts of it (e.g., Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Neuendorf et al., 2000; Tucker, 1997). In that way, media coverage may serve to make polar the various racial divides on guilt/innocence, general racial bias in the criminal justice system, and other issues of racial policy (e.g., Toobin, 1995; Tan & Fujioka, 2000).

Understanding Portrayals of Race

To better understand how sensationalized reporting values accompanying such trial coverage influence public attitudes concerning racism and public
policy, it’s useful to explore media influence from the perspective of cultivation theory. Cultivation is one of the more central frameworks for understanding long-term effects of media influence, focusing on the relationship between media use—particularly TV viewing—and measures purporting to distinguish TV answers from reality. Gerbner and his associates (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986) suggested that media cultivate or create for media audiences a picture of the world that looks much like the one they see in the media.

The literature provides considerable evidence that media portrayals of African Americans (and other minorities) offer audiences negative and stereotypic images (Atkin, 1992; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman, 1992; Gerbner & Signorielli, 1979; Gray, 1994, 2004; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Kenney, Zukowski, & Glassman, 1996; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Mastro & Behm-Morzatzwitz, 2005; Stroman, Merritt, & Matabane, 1989–1990). The racial hegemony indicated by a raft of empirical and critical investigations leads us to a prediction that greater exposure to mediated images of African Americans may result in mainstreaming (e.g., Gerbner et al., 1986); that is, a more consistent set of African American portrayals would prompt a reduction in the variance in viewer perceptions of that group. However, Armstrong, Neuendorf, and Brentar (1992) found a clear difference in effects of TV entertainment exposure (i.e., producing perceptions of Black Americans as more socio-economically “upscale”) and the impact of TV news exposure (i.e., related to perceptions of Blacks as relatively worse off). Trials of celebrities like Simpson and Bryant thus crystallize some of the more central themes in race coverage about which African Americans have expressed concern for decades (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977), including underclass Black males and White victims (Campbell, 1995; Dates & Barlow, 1990; Gray, 1994, 2004; Gerbner, 1995; Tucker, 1997; C. C. Wilson et al., 2003).

Research in and outside of the cultivation tradition indicates that television viewing encourages stereotyping (McGhee & Frueh, 1980; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Viewer interpretations of characters on television may be role specific, and perhaps mediated by social locators (Dambrot, Reep, & Bell, 1988). Working from cultivation theory, Matabane’s (1988) research on Black audiences found that heavier viewers were more likely than light viewers to agree that (a) Blacks are well integrated into society, (b) they socialize, (c) Blacks and Whites are similar, and they tended to (d) overestimate the size of the Black middle class. Although these results generally mirror cultivation effects derived from White samples (e.g., Armstrong et al., 1992), Matabane found that the effect of heavy viewing is most prominent in “isolating pockets of black dissidence among young and better-educated Afro-Americans and, to a lesser extent, individuals not active in their communities or in keeping informed about social events” (p. 29).

Research (e.g., Moore, 1995; Neuendorf et al., 2000) suggests that news coverage has little influence on public attitudes, in the context of individual
Black defendants or general racial issues. Studies of media exposure suggest that African Americans spend more time with the medium than Whites, exhibiting higher levels of dependency on the medium for news and information (e.g., Becker, Kosicki, & Jones, 1992; Fujioka, 2005; Poindexter & Stroman, 1981). But when assessing the impact of media exposure on racial attitudes, researchers are left with a problem similar to that of cultivation research, one of comparisons (i.e., determining a “relevant point” with which to compare media answers).

Potter (1991) noted that the media or TV answer is almost impossible to determine because viewers take into account so many contextual elements of portrayals when they infer meaning from media. However, as Jeffres, Atkin, and Neuendorf (2001) noted, we do not have the same comparison problem nor make the same assumptions if we apply Gerbner’s mainstreaming concept to public opinion or perception issues. Mainstreaming says that attention to the mass media, and TV in particular, pulls people toward a dominant or consensual point, most often the middle (e.g., Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). But in cases involving high profile defendants, the challenge remains one of determining what “middle ground” might exist—coverage of the O. J. Simpson criminal trial was sufficiently polarized so as to emphasize purely guilt or innocence. The elimination of variance in perspective that should accrue from the mainstreaming process may not occur, however, due to (a) the double-edged (pro vs. con) media perspectives apparent in such cases, and (b) the diversity of perspective accompanying the fragmentation of new media (e.g., Perse, Ferguson, & McLeod, 1994). Today’s fragmented content and exposure patterns thus foster greater selectivity on the part of audience members, necessitating consideration of audience exposure to a range of media modalities.

Now that the media are no longer monolithic, substitutable entities it’s useful to consider perspectives that examine content-specific dimensions of media exposure. For instance, media use and effects models (e.g., Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rubin, Perse, & Taylor, 1988) suggest that the type of programs (e.g., Lett, DiPietro, & Johnson, 2004), amount of attention given to these programs and how much planning goes into watching programs are more effective in constructing one’s social reality of the world than just mere exposure.

Drawing from that work, opinion surveys can pin-point the normative response on issues of public opinion. It may be profitable to rephrase the mainstreaming hypothesis so that we focus on whether attention to TV and the other media increases the likelihood that someone “shares” the local consensus on issues relating to the guilt or innocence of African American celebrity defendants. In addition, we may look at whether heavy users of certain media are more homogenous, that is, whether the variance on a perceptual or attitudinal measure is reduced with increasing exposure. But such perspectives still fail to provide a clear picture of the messages to which
audience members are exposed (i.e., “pro” or “anti” defendant), nor can they account for what audiences do with that information in terms of external (peer-group) or internal (psychological) filters (Sears, Van Laar, Carrillo, & Kosterman, 1997), reviewed in turn.

Selective Perception and Social Affiliation

When examining how audiences process information on African American defendants and on race relations generally, it’s useful to consider seminal work on selective perception (e.g., Klapper, 1960). In such a universally “obtrusive” case, where exposure to the issue is high across the board, with little variance across individuals, the emphasis on selective perception becomes particularly relevant. And, the question arises as to how strong media influences can be. Research dating to Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) uncovered a tendency for those who expose themselves most to mass media to change their behavior less than those not exposed to it. Media influences are thus neither monolithic nor all-powerful; rather, they result from active processing of information which Kraus and Davis deem a transactional communication dynamic (Kraus & Davis, 1976).

Drawing from the early work of Lazarsfeld, Katz, and others, we see that interpersonal influences are more powerful than media influences. Opinion leaders might, for example, pick up reports about Kobe Bryant from news media. They would then pass the information along, after some modification, to members of their social circle. More recently, researchers have expanded the multistep flow by suggesting that people within different social classes make very different interpretations of media (Surette, 1992; C. C. Wilson et al., 2003).

Consistency models (e.g., Perloff, 2003) suggest that people selectively expose themselves to messages that are compatible with their beliefs—that is incriminating reports on the accused or press conferences from prosecution—while avoiding dissonant messages. Even when audiences expose themselves to discordant messages, they tend to distort them through the “rose-colored lens” of selective perception, perhaps after discussing them with like-minded individuals (which could also prompt a selective retention of facts supporting an innocent verdict). In addition, it’s clear that race may serve as a mechanism for selective perception and recall, as shown in Oliver and Fonash’s study of identification of Black and White criminal suspects (2002; see also Coover, 2001; Lim & Kuwahara, 2003).

Defense attorneys, for instance, played to this sentiment when alleging police harassment of Simpson (Thaler, 1997), knowing that it represents an obtrusive issue for lower-income minorities who face higher rates of incarceration. In that regard, contrary (anti-Simpson) messages would have relatively little influence on these individuals, because they already have extensive experience with the issue. According to recent work (Neuendorf
et al., 2000), such a dynamic explains the “racial divide” in public perceptions concerning guilt in such cases, as Blacks are more likely to identify with police “rousting” of suspects in their community (e.g., Tuch & Weitzer, 1997).

TV coverage emphasizes that trials involving Black celebrity defendants are exceptionally important by its abundant coverage. But such coverage invariably provides a balance—of appearances by Blacks and Whites, of pro and con arguments and evidence—to allow audience members to selectively interpret as they choose (e.g., Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Neuendorf et al., 2000), as often occurs in other racial “hot-button” issues like affirmative action (Jeffres, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 1999; Tan & Fujioka, 2000). At the same time, research on divisive news coverage (Anastasio, Rose, & Chapman, 2005) has indicated that exposure to media reports of public opinion divided by gender, race, or political affiliation may lead to polarization of audience members’ opinions.

Attitudes toward Affirmative Action

Poll data have indicated that a majority of Americans believe that affirmative action programs have improved the lot of African Americans, and that the perceived need for affirmative action programs has increased in recent years (Paul, 2003), indicating a continued salience for the issue in the American public agenda. While confirming the expected gender and race differences in support for affirmative action, researchers have found significant mediators of these differences: racism/prejudice, traditional attitudes toward women, belief in the existence of discrimination, “diversity” framing of news stories about affirmative action, and perceptions of personal benefit from affirmative action (Aberson, 2003; Fujioka & Tan, 2003; Konrad & Spitz, 2003; Richardson, 2005). In addition, negative evaluation of Black media images has been related to endorsement of affirmative action among Black respondents (Fujioka, 2005).

Although the role of media coverage in fostering a “racial divide” on perceptions of a Black celebrity defendant’s guilt or innocence has been well-established (Brigham & Wasserman, 1999; Toobin, 1995; Neuendorf et al., 2000), the influence of this dynamic on such corollary issues as discrimination and racial policy in the United States remains unclear (Fujioka & Tan, 2003). Tan and Fujioka, (2000) found support for a path model predicting that “TV use leads to affect which then leads to opinions on related issues,” one that explained how citizens “make-up their minds” (p. 362) regarding government policies on affirmative action. Tan et al. concluded that “negative TV portrayals predicted negative stereotypes, which predicted opposition to affirmative action policies” (p. 362).

Sears et al. (1997) examined Whites’ opposition to affirmative action for Blacks in three national polls and one local survey. The strongest predictor in
all cases was an additive index of (a) a perception of lower societal racial discrimination, (b) absence of positive emotions toward Blacks, (c) a belief that Blacks need to work harder, (d) a perception that Blacks are making excessive demands, and (e) the belief that Blacks have an undeserved advantage. This questionable tautology of prediction is less interesting than the fact that, even after the inclusion of these factors, overall affect toward Blacks, party identification and racist attitudes still provide significant prediction of affirmative action attitudes.

Sniderman and Carmines's (1997) review of survey data highlights salient linkages involving race and attitudes toward affirmative action. Sears et al. (1997) concluded that such White resentment was fed by a belief that Blacks violate traditional American values like the work ethic (operationalized as individualism, morality, and authoritarianism). Such scholarship posits that the new symbolic racism—motivated by other symbols including welfare, single parenting, and crime, as well as the perception that Blacks have gotten more than they deserve (Sears & Henry, 2003)—has largely replaced the more blatant, “old-fashioned,” or overt racist attitudes (e.g., support for segregation), as well as a personality-based view of prejudice (Grossarth-Maticek, Eysenck, & Vetter, 1989).

Meertens and Pettigrew (1997) found that subtle prejudice—that which is “cool, distant, and indirect”—can be measured reliably and separately from the more traditional form of blatant prejudice, which is “hot, close and direct.” Their findings contradict Sniderman and Carmine’s (1997) notion that subtle prejudice is a function of political conservatism, as expressed through opposition to such measures as affirmative action. Meertins and Pettigrew (1997, p. 55) found instead that such prejudice could be distinguished from conservatism, as “an outgrowth of the establishment of norms that proscribe blatant expressions of prejudice and discrimination.”

This subtle prejudice is particularly strong among the young, well-educated and the politically liberal (Krysan, 1998). The dynamic helps explain a contradictory finding among Whites, who express (a) increased support—over time and education level—for principles of racial equality, despite (b) lower levels of support, less change, and little relation to education for government policies to implement these principles (Krysan, 1998).

CURRENT STUDY

Although a complete sociological accounting of factors underpinning attitudes toward affirmative action exceeds the scope of this study, it is useful to model the role that exposure to media accounts—particularly in a racially-charged case—might have on such attitudes. Linking affirmative action attitudes to media uses, Mendelberg (1997) found exposure to a news segment on Afro American convict Willie Horton increased resistance to
affirmative action in schools. The present study constitutes a next step in a process of model-building for the explanation of differential attitudes concerning a Black celebrity defendant’s guilt or innocence. Previous analyses of different public opinion polls (e.g., Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Salwen & Driscoll, 1997; Neuendorf et al., 2000) described herein, resulted in several important conclusions:

- Although race was a significant zero-order predictor of perceptions of innocence, that relationship proved to be nonsignificant when other factors were taken into account.
- Significant positive predictors of perceived innocence included positive attitudes toward affirmative action, perceived reality of TV, and a view of the world as mean and crime-ridden.

These previous analyses determined that race was a minor contributor to perceptions of a Black celebrity’s innocence, which dissipated to the point of nonsignificance when following other variables in a multiple regression equation. Not content with simply dismissing race as a factor, we endeavored to explore the role that race does play in a model predicting attitudes toward the racially charged Simpson case.

The hypothesized model is shown in Figure 1. Based on prior analyses and theories relating to selective perception of mediated messages, cultivation
analysis, and agenda-setting, selected social locators (AfAm Identity and Income) are linearly and directly linked to support for affirmative action (Support AA) and perceptions of O. J. Simpson’s innocence (OJ Innocent). The affirmative action component is designated as the outcome of exposure to newspaper reports (Newspaper), along with the belief that African Americans get the worst treatment in the mass media (Neg AfAm Media) and racial identity (Phinney, 1992; C. C. Wilson et al., 2003; W. J. Wilson, 1980; AfAm Identity). Whereas a Black self-identification and newspaper readership have been inversely linked in past work (see Jeffres, 1997), each is predicted to hold a direct causal path to affirmative action attitudes. Specifically, we expect that Blacks are more likely to support affirmative action, as are those who believe that African Americans are treated badly in the media. To the extent that issues such as affirmative action generally receive unfavorable print media coverage (e.g., Entman, 1992; Sears & Henry, 2005), then newspaper readership should be inversely linked to support for the issue.

We expect that the strongest supporters of affirmative action are likely to be Black (Blalock, 1982; Giddings, 1984; Tan & Fujioka, 2000). The model also predicts a direct path from affirmative action attitudes to attitudes about a black celebrity’s guilt or innocence, linked via the mechanism of a cynical view of the institutions surrounding a high profile case—the police, the justice system, the media. Those who perceive a pattern of strong institutional racism may also be more likely to accept the Black defendant’s contention of a broad-based institutional conspiracy inspired by racism.

Although affirmative action attitudes and race are central to our model’s prediction of defendant perceptions, three other direct causal agents are posited: First, perceived reality of television (Perceived Reality) is seen as an outcome of exposure to fictional video images in the home (TV and Videos), and a direct influence on attitudes. Acceptance of the simplistic, hegemonic vision of good guys versus bad guys prominent in television and video content is posited to lead to an acceptance of “sports hero” (e.g., O. J. Simpson’s) conspiracy defense, in the absence of contradictory documentary evidence. Second, perceptions of the real world as mean and threatening (Mean World) are predicted to serve as another direct link to attitudes about the defendant, as a more pessimistic vision would relate to acceptance of a defendant’s defense of police incompetence and conspiracy.

Such a “mean world perception” is placed in the model as a cultivated outcome of exposure to videos, exposure to movies in the theater (Movies), lower income (Income), and a cynical attitude toward people’s motivations (Cynicism). Simple TV exposure (TV) is not linked to the mean world attitude, based on earlier analyses that revealed that it was far less influential in determining the attitude than were video and movie exposure. In the increasingly fragmented entertainment industries, perhaps the really meanest worlds are those found in the most “selective,” and often extreme moving media—videos and feature films. Third, household income is displayed as
an important predictor of attitudes toward guilt or innocence, with the notion, supported by past investigations, that poorer respondents would be more likely to accept a conspiracy defense.

Two interaction effects are posited in the model: (a) An interaction between race and perceptions of negative Black stereotypes in the media (Interaction 1) reflects the selective perception notion that Black viewers may respond to negative Black stereotypes with a stronger commitment to affirmative action than will non-Black respondents. (b) An interaction between race and newspaper readership (Interaction 2) is also based on selective perception precepts, allowing for differential responses to newspaper coverage (e.g., Black readers respond to news by becoming more supportive of affirmative action, whereas non-Black readers do not).

**METHODS**

Data for this study were collected via a telephone poll involving a regional probability sample from a metropolitan area in the Midwest. The present study is a secondary analysis of the survey (Neuendorf et al., 2000), which yielded a sample of 313 respondents using traditional random-digit dialing techniques applied to a CATI system. The survey was introduced to potential respondents as a general poll about current issues, and contained items tapping respondents’ opinions on a wide variety of issues. Eleven-point Likert-type questions tapped a five-item Perceived Reality (of television) index (Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994) (“Perceived Reality”), the three-item Mean World index (Rubin et al., 1994; “Mean World”), and a number of original items measuring attitudes toward racial issues: “Affirmative action is still necessary to help minorities and other groups” (“Support AA”); “Some people are just plain bad” (“Cynicism”); “From the evidence... it looks like O. J. Simpson is innocent [of murder]” (“OJ Innocent”).

Open-ended questions included the following: (a) Name three racial or ethnic groups that you think get the worst treatment in the mass media, and (b) How would you describe your ethnic background? From these open-ended questions, dummy-coded indicators were created, including: (a) names Blacks among top 3 worst media images (“Neg AfAm Media”); and (b) self-identifies as Black American (or African-American or Afro-American) (“AfAm Identity”).

Other items measured social indicators (Mendelberg, 1997; “Income”) and media habits (hours of TV viewing yesterday; “TV”), number of movies seen at a theater in the past month (“Movies”), number of rented or borrowed videos viewed in the past month (“Videos”), and number of days reading the newspaper in the past week (“Newspaper”).

The two standard indexes were each submitted to reliability analysis, and showed acceptable levels of Cronbach’s alpha (Perceived Reality $\alpha = .58$; Mean World $\alpha = .73$), and an additive index was constructed for each.
**TABLE 1** Correlation Matrix for Study Variables.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OJ Innocent</th>
<th>Perceived Reality</th>
<th>Mean World</th>
<th>Cynicism</th>
<th>Support AA</th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Videos</th>
<th>Movies</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>AfAm Identity</th>
<th>Neg AfAm Media</th>
<th>Interaction 1</th>
<th>Interaction 2</th>
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<td>Perceived Reality</td>
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<td>Mean World</td>
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<td>Cynicism</td>
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<td>Support AA</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction 1</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.28*</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.14*</td>
<td>0.80*</td>
<td>0.32*</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction 2</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>-0.18*</td>
<td>0.80*</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.65*</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $n = 198$.

*p < .05 (all correlation coefficients with an absolute value of .14 or greater), two-tailed.
Finally, two interaction terms were constructed: (a) “Interaction 1”—Black identity and newspaper readership (AfAm Identity × Newspaper), and (b) “Interaction 2”—Black identity and perceptions that Blacks are among the worst media images (AfAm Identity × Neg AfAm Media).

The sample was 55% female, with a median age of 40 years. Sixty-four percent self-identified as White and 14% as Black. Other groups of non-White, non-Black respondents were not numerous enough to warrant separate coding.

Forty-eight percent of respondents gave an assessment of O. J. Simpson as having a “guilty” valence, and 19% gave responses on the “innocent” side of the scale. A full 33% fell at the midpoint of the 11-point scale. The typical racial difference accrued: 37% of African American respondents gave innocence valenced responses, compared with only 13% of White respondents.

The correlation matrix for all model variables is in Table 1.

RESULTS

The hypothesized model as displayed in Figure 1 was submitted to structural equation analysis via the LISREL 7.0 computer program. A maximum-likelihood solution was used, with a fixed model. The results of the first LISREL analysis revealed weak and nonsignificant contributions of the two interaction terms to affirmative action attitudes (standardized coefficients were —.01 and .04 for Interaction 1 and Interaction 2, respectively). And, this initial analysis resulted in the “automatic” model modification (based on modification indices) with the addition of a significant link leading from affirmative action support to perceived reality of TV.

To assure an unbiased interpretation of the attendant main effects for race (AfAm Identity), newspaper readership (Newspaper), and negative perceptions of mediated Black images (Neg AfAm Media), the two interactions were dropped and a second LISREL analysis was conducted. The results of the refined analysis are shown in Figure 2.

Overall, the model performed very well, with a total coefficient of determination of .30. Individual structural equations varied in their predictive power, but were all substantial ($R^2$s for the four equations were as follows: OJ Innocent, .17; Perceived Reality, .09; Mean World, .10; Support AA, .14). The nonsignificant chi-square statistic indicates a favorable differentiation from the null model, and the goodness-of-fit statistic was quite strong (.98, with adjusted GOF of .94). The root mean square residual was .03.

Most of the specified links proved to be statistically significant. The only nonsignificant links were those leading from Mean World to OJ Innocent (.07), from Cynicism to Mean World (.07), from Movies to Mean World (.12), and from AfAm Identity to OJ Innocent (.12).
Although it is impossible to capture the richness of the entire significant model in a short description, the following provides one verbal narrative of the key mechanisms discovered here:

An individual perceives consistently negative Black images in the media, and does not access the “big picture” available in newspapers that may provide diverse and alternative minority images. The individual, who is somewhat more likely to be African American but is not necessarily of that race, begins to believe that things are bad for Blacks in our society and perceives a real need for affirmative action programs. He also sees a world on TV that conforms to this notion, and believes more strongly in the reality of televised images. In addition, the individual is likely to be poorer and to view the real world as “meaner.” He can more readily identify with the supposed victimization of a Black celebrity defendant (e.g., O. J. Simpson). This constellation of influences may lead to the individual believing in the defendant’s innocence—believing “the system” to be eminently capable of setting him up. He was, according to this view, the victim of a hostile, unfair, and possibly even racist society.

That the two hypothesized interaction terms proved to be nonsignificant is both surprising and informative in the context of racial consensus. Although one might expect Black and non-Black Americans to respond differentially to
negative stereotypes of Blacks in the media, this does not seem to be the case here. Blacks and non-Blacks respond fairly equally when they perceive that Blacks are among the most negatively stereotyped racial/ethnic groups—they feel a greater need for affirmative action in our society. Blacks and non-Blacks also respond in approximately equal fashion to newspaper content—the more they read, the less they feel affirmative action is needed. The relatively homogeneous way in which these strong predictors of affirmative action attitudes operate actually refutes the notion that a racial schism is dividing our society. The proposition that polarizing media coverage in such cases resulted in attitudinal divergence does not receive support from this study. Nor is our original notion of selective perception supported—the expectation of Blacks and non-Blacks reacting differently to mediated images in their formation of perceptions of the current necessity for affirmative action.

DISCUSSION

This research has extended prior work that began the process of removing race as a direct and causal agent in determining attitudes toward racially-charged court cases involving a Black celebrity. We thus continue the process of constructing a theoretical framework that does not exclude the obvious (but nonsignificant) predictors, but rather places them appropriately in a multistep structural equation model. Here, we established that racial identity is indeed a “player” in the model predicting such attitudes, but as a largely indirect influence in the complex model. Quite simply, it’s not as clear-cut as “Black vs. White,” the simplistic vision the popular press would have us believe. W. J. Wilson’s (1980) prescient insistence on “The Declining Significance of Race” warrants reconsideration.

The complex nature of respondent support for affirmative action is clear from the model’s structure. Through this nexus, African American racial identity, newspaper readership, and perceptions of negative African American media images express their influence on perceptions of a Black celebrity defendant’s innocence. It is this variable that, surprisingly, exhibits strong influence on perceived reality of TV, which in turn shows a direct influence on attitudes toward Simpson.

Sniderman and Carmines (1997) have provided an important linkage on this matter from a sociological perspective, countering even the strong evidence of symbolic racism uncovered in past work. Although most of the research on attitudinal responses to high profile trials focuses on the “racial divide” involving innocence or guilt, the divide we found pertained instead to affirmative action attitudes. A negative interpretation of that finding might conceptualize affirmative action as a symbolic racism indicator—where Whites resist because they believe it gives an inherent unfair advantage to minorities—but opposition is actually motivated by deeper racial resentment;
that is, the negative response may, in fact, be a manifestation of an underlying anti-Black affect fed by such notions as perceived Black underachievement (Sears & Henry, 2003; Sears et al., 1997; Tan & Fujioka, 2000).

A more positive interpretation of that dynamic can be found in the recent trend toward critical examination of affirmative action—by conservatives and liberals alike (Sniderman & Carmines, 1997)—including a number of Black intellectual and political leaders (e.g., Ward Connerly). In this view, affirmative action is a symbol, but one that provides the touchstone for racial dialogue, political reform and other actions that bridge the “racial divide.” Thus, rather than symbolizing an insidious source of racial division, affirmative action may represent a policy issue upon which people from diverse backgrounds can find common ground.

In the nonsignificance of the two interaction terms, the model begins to eliminate potential explanatory mechanisms for the racial division (Newport, 1995; Neuendorf et al., 2000) in response to prominent trials of African American athletes. What is needed now is the introduction of additional factors that will help explain why African Americans perceive a greater need for affirmative action. From this study, we see no evidence that it is because of differential reactions to stereotypes of Blacks in the media, nor because of differential interpretations of print news. Additional factors may include types and numbers of interpersonal relationships, parental influence, and personal experiences with institutional discrimination. With relevance to cases involving Black celebrity defendants, this dynamic might include personal experience with police harassment (Tuch & Weitzer, 1997).

Perceived reality of television plays a strong and surprising role in the model. Influenced by TV and video exposure (with video exposure leading to lower credence given to TV images), perceived reality shows a strong direct impact on attitudes toward the guilt or innocence of a Black celebrity. In addition, the influence of affirmative action attitudes on perceived reality, originally not hypothesized and “automatically” added to the model by LISREL’s modification option, clarifies an intricate role in the model. Seemingly, TV still presents a social world that confirms the notions of those who maintain that affirmative action is a necessary component to American society, despite certain protestations to the contrary. The resultant perceived reality is one significant influence leading to perceptions of O. J.’s innocence.

“Mean world” perceptions, originally hypothesized to play a major role in determining attitudes toward O. J., did not. The construct is important in the model, significantly related to income and specific media exposure measures, but does not have a strong direct influence on attitudes toward Simpson. We should further note the divergence from the work of Gerbner and his associates—but as predicted by us—that perceptions of a “mean world” in this study are not directly related to TV exposure, but rather to video and film exposure, providing support for the notion of a “meaner
world” of feature films, and potentially the “drench hypothesis” notion of compelling and overwhelming filmic experiences (Greenberg, 1988).

In concert with this finding, it is interesting to note how divergently the five media measures perform in the model. Different types of exposure result in different mechanisms in the model overall, extending the work of Armstrong et al. (1992). And, media variables are “bridesmaids” with regard to determining attitudes toward the celebrity defendant; that is, all are indirect rather than direct influences. Succinctly put, media exposure can be viewed as a necessary but not a sufficient element in attitude formation on issues related to race, as the Kerner Commission first noted over thirty years ago.

Clearly, there are still factors unaccounted for in the model predicting attitudes in such cases. Although the Figure 2 model has an impressive goodness-of-fit, the variances accounted for are only moderate. That is, given the variables tapped for this study, the model performs admirably; but, the measurement and inclusion of other variables might provide greater prediction. The present analysis is also limited in that it represents a snapshot of public opinion in a large, ethnically diverse community. Respondents have been exposed to crime reporting on other high-profile African American celebrities since the time of this survey (e.g., Michael Jackson). Other work suggests that Simpson has lost public support, although a racial divide persists (Fischhoff, 1996; Jeffres et al., 1999; Neuendorf et al., 2000).

This study endeavors to build a robust, multifaceted framework that acknowledges the power of attitudes, regardless of racial identity, in provoking responses to a racially-charged event. We have succeeded in identifying factors that mediate the impact of (a) race and (b) media exposure patterns on perceptions of the guilt or innocence of a Black celebrity defendant. In terms of the former, we have “shuffled the race card” in a slim deck of alternative factors, eliminating race as a strong, direct, causal agent. With regard to the latter, we have avoided the pitfalls of assuming a strong, direct influence of simple media exposure, and continued the process of the elaboration of media effects on attitudes important to our multicultural society.

NOTES

1. Other prominent events involving race that emerged after 1990 include Rodney King’s beating and subsequent race riots in Los Angeles, the State of California’s move to end Affirmative Action in university admissions, publication of Herrnstein and Murray’s controversial best-seller addressing racial I.Q. gaps and Minister Louis Farrakhan’s Million Man March.

2. Thernstrom (1996) maintains that race became the very theme of the Simpson murder trial. From the beginning, Simpson supporters portrayed him as a victim of the crime, a victim of overt racism. Simpson’s defense team lambasted the forensic evidence presented against him, offering theories of a possible frame-up by racist police officers (Dershowitz, 1996). As Thaler (1997) recounts, this report fit into a series of Simpson defense team leaks that played to a “turbulent history involving the LAPD and the minority communities of Los Angeles” that had been “simmering under the surface” for some years.
When the predominantly Black jury returned a “not guilty” plea for Simpson in less than three hours, outcries emerged from the public and the press (Director, 1995). Predictions of an increasing “racial divide” abounded. Researchers began to identify race as an important determinant of one’s beliefs in Simpson’s innocence (Driscoll & Salwen, 1987).

3. Television use was a first stage value in their heuristic causal chain, and stereotypes of African Americans were the second stage; the most explanatory paths were from perceived negative TV attributes to stereotypes—and stereotypes to opinions.

4. They found linkages suggesting that (a) the role of racial prejudice in promoting opposition to affirmative action is minor; (b) rather than opposition to affirmative action signaling a refusal to acknowledge the discrimination and exploitation that Black Americans have suffered, a substantial majority of White Americans believe that an extra effort should be made to see that Blacks are treated fairly; (c) opposition to affirmative action is not peculiar to White Americans; (d) opposition to affirmative action does not hinge on the race of the group who benefits but rather on whether the procedures involved are judged to be fair; (e) in addition to the dislike of Blacks leading to dislike of affirmative action, dislike of affirmative action fosters dislike of Blacks; and (f) opposition has burst conventional political channels—it is now as prevalent on the left among liberals and Democrats, as with Conservatives on the right.

5. Numerous other indicators in the survey tapped additional standard social indicators (e.g., gender, age, educational level, marital status), attitudes toward crime, poverty, racial stereotyping, and problems facing society, and additional media habits and preferences (e.g., books read, radio listening). Multiple regression analyses eliminated these as important influences on attitudes toward O. J. Simpson’s innocence or guilt.

6. Turning to linkages not found significant in the model, there is no evidence of a cultivation function for negative media portrayals of Blacks (TV and Neg AfAm Media are relatively unrelated; r = .03). And as noted before, the two interaction terms and race (AfAm), all with significant zero-order relationships with their posited outcomes, fail to consistently provide significant contributions when the full model is tested.

REFERENCES


