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# The Impact of Stereotypical Versus Counterstereotypical Media Exemplars on Racial Attitudes, Causal Attributions, and Support for Affirmative Action

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## Abstract

This study examines how exposure to media characters of color shapes viewers' opinions of race-targeted policies. Exemplar-based information processing, attribution theory, and heuristic policy decision-making formed the theoretical foundation for the study. A  $2 \times 2$  factorial experiment ( $N = 363$ ) exposed participants to stereotypical or counter-stereotypical exemplars representing the in-group (Whites) and the out-group (Blacks). The experiment revealed that exposure to stereotypical African American media characters compared to exposure to counter-stereotypical ones influenced real-world beliefs of African American stereotypes, internal attributions for perceived failures of this out-group, prejudicial feelings toward this out-group, and lack of support for pro-minority affirmative action policies. A structural model established "internal attributions for out-group failures" as a crucial mediator. Implications for entertainment studies and political communication are discussed.

## Keywords

racial attitudes, stereotypes, exemplars, experiment

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Portrayals of African Americans in the mass media have a long-standing history of using demeaning and violent stereotypes. Although the majority of content analyses on this topic have focused on news media (Dixon & Linz, 2000b; Entman, 1992, 1994; Entman & Rojecki, 2000), similar studies of entertainment programming show that Black characters are presented in limited stereotypical roles in dramas, sitcoms, and reality shows (Children Now, 2003; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Mastro & Robinson, 2000; Merritt & Stroman, 1993; Oliver, 1994). Much of the existing research focuses on how stereotypical depictions of African Americans in news stories influence evaluations of individual target members from racial/ethnic out-groups (for e.g., Dixon, 2005, 2006; Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). But arguably, media stereotypes influence more than just social judgments of ambiguous targets. Potentially, media stereotypes can shape real-world beliefs, intergroup emotions, causal interpretations, and supportive responses toward out-groups.

The current investigation contributes to the literature by identifying a series of variables that link exposure to stereotypical media exemplars with viewers' opinions about race-related social issues. Specifically, this experimental study examines how exposure to stereotypical versus counter-stereotypical media characters influences support for affirmative action. In particular, this study expands prior research of the effects of media messages on policy decision-making (Mastro & Kopacz, 2006; Pan & Kosicki, 1998; Ramasubramanian, 2010; Tan, Fujioka, & Tan, 2000) by exploring the role of "internal attributions for out-group failures" as an important mediating variable. The experimental data employed provide greater confidence in the validity of the structural model presented in this study compared to survey data used in prior research. The inclusion of stereotypical out-group media exemplars alongside counter-stereotypical exemplars presents the opportunity for simultaneous examination of their influence on intergroup outcomes.

## Literature Review

### *Media Exemplars and Racial Stereotypes*

Traditionally, stereotypes were conceptualized as schemas or cognitive representations stored and retrieved from memory as abstract generalizations (Dovidio, Evans, & Tyler, 1986; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). However, scholars have recently proposed exemplar-based processing as an alternative to abstraction models (Bodenhausen, Schwarz, Bless, & Waenke, 1995; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Linville, Fischer, & Salovey, 1989). Exemplars are specific, concrete instances of a category but prototypes are abstractions of typical, "averaged" representations of a category (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). According to the representativeness heuristic, people tend to overuse accessible exemplar information while estimating social reality (Krupat, Smith, Leach, & Jackson, 1997; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Factors such as recency, frequency, and vividness influence exemplar accessibility, which in turn influences social judgments (Busselle & Shrum, 2003; Wyer & Srull, 1989).

Mass media provide a rich source of powerful exemplars (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). White viewers habitually encounter a range of racial/ethnic out-group media characters in today's television environment. African Americans, for instance, are overrepresented in television news as violent lawbreakers (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b; Entman, 1992, 1994; Entman & Rojecki, 2000). In contrast, entertainment genres feature African Americans in more favorable positive roles: law-abiding citizens in positions of high authority (Matabane & Merritt, 1996; Stroman, Merritt, & Matabane, 1989-1990; Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, & Huang, 2000). Considering the differing portrayals based on varying genre norms, viewing preferences could lead to a lopsided experience of racial/ethnic out-groups on television.

Previous research shows that exposure to counterstereotypical versus stereotypical media exemplars has a positive effect on reducing stereotypical attitudes (Bodenhausen et al., 1995; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Power, Murphy, & Coover, 1996; Ramasubramanian, 2007; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007). Using the priming paradigm, Power and colleagues (1996) demonstrated that audiences' exposures to counterstereotypical media exemplars led to sympathetic interpretations of minority groups represented in subsequent news stories.

Because of their pervasiveness, media stereotypes are frequently and easily accessible as cognitive shortcuts for influencing subsequent evaluations. Because of the chronic accessibility of racial stereotypes, even subtle racial cues in the media are sufficient to activate racial attitudes that influence decision-making without requiring conscious effort (Bargh, 1994; Blair, 2001; Devine, 1989). Chronically accessible exemplars actively reinforce or modify existing schemas or associative networks related to out-groups, which in turn have long-term effects on viewers' attitudes and opinions (Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Valentino, 1999). For example, exposure to Black crime suspects rather than White suspects in news stories primes viewers to evaluate ambiguous targets in vignettes that followed as more dangerous, guiltier of committing a crime, and deserving of harsher punishment (Dixon, 2006).

Through a series of related studies, Bodenhausen and colleagues (1995) proposed the generalized appraisal model, which suggested that encounters with positively appraised out-group members will lead to a positive shift in general attitudes toward the out-group as a whole. The study found that exposure to likable as compared to dislikable/ambivalent African Americans caused respondents to be more sympathetic toward African Americans. Apparently, this effect lasted as long as participants remained unaware of the atypical nature of counterstereotypical exemplars.

Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001) found a significant reduction in implicit stereotypes after respondents were exposed to images of admired members of out-groups (African-Americans) as compared to exposure to nonracial exemplars, disliked members of the out-group, or admired members of the in-group. Similarly, research shows that exposure to even a few counterstereotypical news stories as compared to stereotypical news stories reduced perceived stereotypes at explicit and implicit levels (Ramasubramanian, 2007; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007). Repeated exposure to positive intergroup interactions

in television shows inculcates positive attitudes toward out-groups through abstract modeling (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Schiappa, 2005).

Apart from the valence of the exemplars, the ways in which viewers categorize media characters also has some bearing on attitude formation and change. Extending social identity theory to mediated contexts, audiences are likely to categorize media characters as belonging to in-groups or out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). These researchers found that favorable social comparisons of in-group media characters with relevant out-group media characters could help maintain positive group esteem and a sense of superiority. Media discourses often legitimize out-group discrimination by highlighting group differences, encouraging intergroup comparisons, and privileging dominant group members in subtle ways. Positive depictions of Whiteness along with demeaning portrayals of African Americans in popular culture could jointly contribute to strengthening existing stereotypical attitudes of viewers. In sum, the literature suggested that the valence of media exemplars (positive or negative) and the group categorization of exemplars (in-group or out-group) impacts viewers' racial attitudes.

### *Media Exemplars and Internal Attributions for Out-Group Failures*

Attribution theory suggests that individuals have a basic psychological need to attribute particular causes to specific outcomes as a way of controlling and predicting their social environments (Heider, 1958). Perceivers can attribute events to either internal (individual) or external (societal) causes (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965), among which factors such as perceived locus of control, assumed intentionality, and social desirability of the behaviors influence the types of attributions made (Weiner, 1986). Audiences of media messages employ similar explanatory judgment processes in an attempt to understand and explain the behaviors of media characters within televised narratives.

Portrayals of race/ethnicity on television not only lead to biased perceptions about *how* racial groups differ from each other along various traits and characteristics, but also offer suggestions for *why* subordinate groups deserve their assigned positions (Entman, 1993; Feagin, 2006). Media messages provide subtle cues using verbal and visual devices that facilitate certain causal interpretations over others (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997; Knobloch-Westerwick & Taylor, 2008; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002). Whereas narratives that focus on individual ability, motivations, and dispositions emphasize internal causes, those stories that center on situational factors, luck, and circumstances highlight external causes.

News stories, for example, routinely use narrative story-telling formats that imply causes and consequences to help their audiences make sense of various people, issues, and events (Sotirovic, 2003). Iyengar's (1990) influential work on framing theory suggested that episodic framing (use of emotion-laden descriptive exemplars) versus thematic framing (the use of general, abstract statements to illustrate an issue) affects causal attributions for social issues such as crime, unemployment, and poverty, which in turn shapes intergroup attitudes and policy opinions. Whereas episodic framing encourages internal attributions such as lack of motivation or poor language skills, thematic framing leads to external attributions for

social issues such as lack of governmental support or presence of discrimination. News reports often dramatize social issues, such as crime and poverty, by focusing on anecdotal exemplars of sensational abnormal individuals, in ways that easily allow blaming personal deficiencies rather than social structures for victims' conditions.

Although such research focused mainly on effects of news content, Pan and Kosicki (1998) demonstrated that media consumption habits could also guide viewers' attributions for failures of Black Americans toward internal causes ("not trying hard enough") or external causes ("due to past slavery and discrimination"). Broadly, they found that newspaper-based information seekers tended less toward making internal attributions as compared to TV-based entertainment seekers. Similarly, Sotirovic (2003) found medium-based differences such that consumers of television news as compared to print newspapers were more likely to use internal attributions for justifying crime and welfare issues. Such internal attributions led to increased support for death penalty and decreased support for welfare programs.

In summary, even understated cues such as the choice of exemplars used to illustrate a social issue can lead to differences in responsibility attributions made to internal causes rather than external causes. Exposure to stereotypical media characters from out-groups might promote individual attributions for out-group failures rather than societal attributions.

### *Media Exemplars and Support for Affirmative Action*

Although prior research suggests that internal causal attributions have implications for social policy opinions (Hewstone, 1986), only a handful of studies have recently started to examine the effects of media stereotypes on heuristic policy decision-making (Mastro & Kopacz, 2006; Pan & Kosicki, 1998; Ramasubramanian, 2010; Tan et al., 2000). Using data from a national election study, Pan and Kosicki considered how ideological conservatism and affect toward Blacks influence reality judgments, causal attributions, and policy support. Although these scholars found only a small, statistically insignificant relationship between news-media use and policy preferences, they pioneered research on the role of media stereotypes in shaping support for affirmative action. Furthering this line of research, scholars have demonstrated that exposure to Black rather than White criminal suspects in news stories increases support for punitive crime policies such as the death penalty and the three-strikes law (Dixon, 2006; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000).

In their influential study, Tan and colleagues (2000) proposed the affective policy reasoning model that examined how televised African American stereotypes correlated with stereotypical beliefs and support for affirmative action. Specifically, participants were asked to recall depictions of African Americans in movies and television. These portrayals were classified as negative or positive before measuring their correlation with policy support and stereotypical beliefs. They found that perceptions of negative television portrayals of African Americans led to negative stereotypical beliefs, which in turn led to decreased support for affirmative action.

Advancing the Tan et al. model, Mastro and Kopacz's study (2006) focused on prototypical minority characters from television as the extraneous variable instead of a

generalized recall of mediated stereotypes. That is, they asked participants to indicate the traits and characteristics of a typical out-group member that they might encounter on television. The elicited traits were broadly divided into two types—those that related to criminality and other traits called “mainstream values, which included the following items: educated, intelligent, rich, self-supporting, family-oriented, and trustworthy.” These measures of prototypicality were correlated with real-world beliefs and policy support.

Building on the models of Tan et al. (2000) and Mastro and Kopacz (2006), more recently, Ramasubramanian (2010) proposed a cognitive-affective model for policy reasoning. This model included affect by introducing prejudicial feelings as a crucial mediator between stereotypical beliefs and policy support. Another contribution of this study was the refinement of the global “mainstream values” measure into a more reliable “perceived laziness” measure. Similar to Mastro and Kopacz, the model was verified for Black and Latino stereotypes.

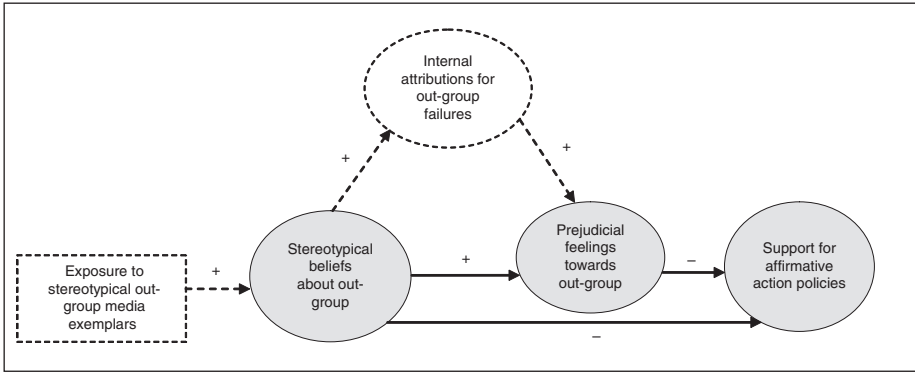
Although these studies have advanced knowledge relating to the literature on the role of media in shaping affirmative action policy opinions, one drawback of all these studies is the reliance on correlation data from surveys to construct models. A lack of control for the type of media stereotypes to which respondents had exposure limits the extent of confidence in claiming televised stereotypes generated decreased policy support. An alternative explanation that prejudiced individuals sought more racist media content and were also likely to be unsupportive of pro-minority social policies was equally plausible. The current study overcomes this drawback by using an experimental design that manipulates exposure to different types of media characters—stereotypical and counterstereotypical—to measure participants’ racial beliefs, prejudicial feelings, internal attributions, and support for affirmative action. If indeed stereotypical portrayals on television activate negative racial attitudes and decreased support for race-targeted policies, then those in the stereotypical experimental condition should report significantly higher prejudice and lack of support for affirmative action than those in the counterstereotypical experimental condition.

### *The Present Study*

The following hypothesis was formulated for the present study based on previous research:

*Hypothesis:* Exposure to stereotypical rather than counterstereotypical out-group media exemplars will increase stereotypical beliefs about out-groups, increase internal attributions for out-group failures, increase prejudicial feelings toward out-groups, and decrease support for affirmative action policies.

Rather than analyze these relationships individually, the present study will use structural equation modeling (SEM), which offers the opportunity to visualize and systematically analyze the media stereotyping *process* as a series of steps between media exposure and policy decision-making by simultaneously testing for direct and indirect effects of



**Figure 1.** The hypothesized model juxtaposed with the cognitive-affective model of policy reasoning (Ramasubramanian, 2010)

Note: Solid lines represent the cognitive-affective model of policy reasoning (Ramasubramanian, 2010). Dotted lines indicate the new variables and links explored in the Exemplar-Based Model of Policy Reasoning proposed in the current study.

observed and latent variables of the entire theoretical model (Stephenson & Holbert, 2003). Building on Ramasubramanian’s (2010) model, this study presents a more comprehensive “Exemplar-Based Model of Policy Reasoning” that incorporates causal attributions of failures of out-groups as an important mediator. Unlike previous studies that relied solely on survey data to measure viewers’ recall of stereotypical media content, exposure to media stereotypes is manipulated rather than measured in this experiment. The use of experimental data provides greater internal validity for the model that clarifies how media exemplars influence audiences’ racial beliefs and policy support.

In addition, including causal attribution for failures as a mediating variable supports understanding the succession of associations between media stereotypes and policy opinions. That is, this framework allows examination of the effects of stereotypical media exemplars on not just out-group perceptions and feelings, but also on the attributions for differences in status between African Americans and White Americans. Based on social identity theory, it examines how negative and positive media exemplars influence racial attitudes of dominant in-group members toward the out-group.

The hypothesized model builds links between exposure to in-group or out-group media exemplars, stereotypical beliefs about out-groups, internal attributions for failures of out-groups, prejudicial feelings toward out-groups, and support for affirmative action policies. Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized model and compares the current model to the cognitive-affective model of policy reasoning (Ramasubramanian, 2010). Dotted lines represent the new variables examined in the study. The exogenous variable considered in this study is: “Exposure to out-group media exemplars.” The current model includes “internal attributions for failures of out-groups” as a mediating variable between stereotypical beliefs of and prejudicial feelings toward out-groups.



## Method

### *Participants*

Participants, recruited from a basic undergraduate communication course open to all majors at a large university, received extra credit for participation. Average age was 19.88 years ( $SD = 1.23$ ). Females represent 51% of the sample. Of the 486 participants, 478 indicated their racial/ethnic identity resulting in 75.9% non-Hispanic Whites, 3.1% non-Hispanic Blacks, 11.1% Hispanic, 4.8% Asian, 0.8% Pacific Islander, and 4.2% who identified themselves as “Other”. Considering that there were not enough Black respondents in this sample, only responses from Whites were included in the final analyses. Since the hypotheses did not deal with other racial groups, data obtained from other racial minority group members were excluded as well.

### *Experimental Design*

This study online used a  $2 \times 2$  (Exposure to Out-group Media Exemplars [positive, negative]  $\times$  Exposure to In-group Media Exemplars [positive, negative]) factorial experimental design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (a) positive out-group and positive in-group exemplars, (b) negative out-group and positive in-group exemplars; (c) positive out-group and negative in-group exemplars; (d) negative out-group and negative in-group exemplars.<sup>1</sup>

Participants were told that they will be participating in two unrelated studies—the first one on recall of media characters and the second on differences in the quality of life of various groups in society. The first part of the experiment involved an “Exemplar Recognition Task” where participants viewed pictures of various media characters from entertainment genres.<sup>2</sup> As a check of effectiveness of the manipulation, participants indicated the source of the televised character, their familiarity with the character, and the degree of character likability. In the second part of the study, the participants completed measures including stereotypical beliefs about out-groups, prejudicial feelings toward out-groups, attributions for out-group failures, and support for affirmative action policies. Finally, participants answered questions relating to media usage patterns and other demographic factors such as gender, age, and major. Although the participants’ attitudes toward African Americans was of research interest, they also completed questions relating to poor people, the judicial system, gun ownership, Latino Americans and Asian Americans, which served to mask the true purpose of the study. Participants were repeatedly asked to be honest in their responses and frank in stating their opinions. They were also informed that there would be no means for the researchers to link their responses to them as individuals.

### *Exemplar Recognition Task*

The initial exemplar recognition task required participants to identify several media characters, indicate a degree of likability, and a degree of familiarity. These questions served as a verification of the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation. In each



experimental condition, participants saw four images of media characters—two who were White Americans and two who were African Americans. Care was taken to include one male and one female character for each racial group. To increase the generalizability of the findings, media characters were drawn from a variety of genres such as talk shows, reality shows, sitcoms, and dramas.

Respondents answered to: “Do you recognize this character?” with “Yes” and “No” as answer options followed by the open-ended question “If yes, please identify where on TV you have seen this character.” Furthermore, participants chose from among options which ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* on a 7-point Likert-type scale in response to questions such as: “I like this character”; “I find this character annoying” (reverse-coded), and “Most people I know are fond of this character.” These measures were adapted from prior research on impression formation and person perception (Stapel & Koomen, 2005; Surawski & Ossoff, 2006). The average scores, calculated for the responses to these items, determined “mean likability” for the characters (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .82$ ). As expected, for in-group White characters, likability scores for positive characters ( $M = 5.73$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) were significantly higher than those for negative characters ( $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ );  $t(627) = 29.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r = 0.78$ . Similarly, for African American characters, positive counterstereotypical characters ( $M = 5.25$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) were more likable compared to negative stereotypical characters ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 3.15$ ),  $t(540) = 16.54$ ;  $p < .01$ ;  $r = 0.58$ .

## Dependent Measures

*Stereotypical beliefs about out-groups.* The measures of real-world stereotypical beliefs about various racial/ethnic out-groups are the result of prior research on common stereotypical traits associated with African Americans (Mastro & Kopacz, 2006; Ramasubramanian, 2010; Tan et al., 2000). Participants were asked to: “Indicate the extent to which you agree that the following traits describe \_\_\_\_\_ (African Americans/Black people, or Caucasian-Americans/White people) in general. Please be honest in your responses.” A 7-point Likert-type scale, *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, allowed participants to choose appropriately.

The questionnaire included two sets of stereotypical beliefs: *criminality* stereotypes and *laziness* stereotypes. The criminality stereotype consisted of four traits: *criminal*, *violent*, *drug dealer*, *drug user* (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .85$ ). The laziness stereotype consisted of *lazy*, *poor*, *welfare recipient*, *uneducated* (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .77$ ). In line with social identity theory’s conceptualization of stereotypes as deviations from in-group norms (Brewer, 1979; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986), computed comparative scores similar to those in Ramasubramanian (2010). Specifically, the raw scores for stereotypical beliefs about African Americans were subtracted from the corresponding scores for the in-group (Whites) to create relative scores. Higher scores for African American perceptions of criminality and laziness stereotypes indicated a significant discrepancy from the in-group White norm along these trait dimensions.

*Internal attributions for failures of out-groups.* One of the new variables considered as a mediator is “Internal Attributions for Failures of Out-groups.” To measure causal attributions

for group differences, instructions to respondents were: "Please indicate the extent to which the following reasons account for differences in quality of life for African Americans/Black people as compared to Caucasian Americans/White people." A list of causes for out-group failures was derived from prior research (Hewstone, 1986; Pan & Kosicki, 1998). Measurement of internal causal attributions used a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *not at all an important factor* to *very important factor*. This index comprised of three items: *lack of motivation*, *lack of social skills*, and *lack of language skills* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ).

**Prejudicial feelings toward out-groups.** To measure participants' racial prejudice, items and scoring pattern was modified from prior research (Katz & Hass, 1988; Katz, Wackenhut, & Hass, 1986; Ramasubramanian, 2010). Specifically, respondents were asked to "Please look at each of the following adjectives to indicate how well they describe your feelings toward \_\_\_\_\_ (African-Americans and Caucasian-Americans) in general. Please be frank in your opinions." This construct labeled *prejudicial feelings toward out-groups* was created by averaging scores from the following six items: *discomfort*, *nervousness*, *disgust*, *dislike*, *fear*, and *anger* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ). Participants recorded their responses using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. To capture the negative affect toward out-groups based on intergroup comparisons, the scores for prejudicial feelings toward African Americans were subtracted from the baseline, White norm scores.

**Support for affirmative action policies.** Items used to measure participants' policy support for affirmative action was modified from existing studies (Ramasubramanian, 2010; Smith, 1991; Tan et al., 2000). Respondents indicated their agreement on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Considering that social desirability could be an issue with responding to these questions, a few precautions were taken to reduce this bias. The instructions urged participants to give honest opinions. These items were masked with other filler questions under a section called "Your beliefs about the justice system in the U.S." The measure was reasonably reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ ) and included the following items: "Affirmative action is one good way to deal with past racial discrimination"; "Universities should NOT consider an applicant's race in the admission process" (reverse-coded), and "Affirmative action policies are unfair to White participants."

## Data Analyses

SEM (AMOS 18.0) using maximum likelihood estimation accounted for missing data and estimated all models. To control for measurement error and to correctly specify the model, a hybrid approach allowed loading all individual items directly on to their respective latent variables. Using the two-step approach, the fit of the measurement model was established prior to estimating the structural model. Stephenson and Holbert (2003) proposed examining the chi-square value, comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) to determine the goodness of fit. The ideal cut-off value for CFI is 0.95 although the closer it is to 1.00, the better the model fits. For RMSEA, values less than 0.06 indicate a good fit. Although each of these indicators has some problems, taken together, they provide a good idea about the overall fit of the model.

**Table 1.** Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for the Endogenous Variables in the Hypothesized Model for African-Americans

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Stereotypical beliefs about criminality	4.93	0.96	—				
Stereotypical beliefs about laziness	4.80	0.95	.77**	—			
Internal attributions for failures	4.35	1.50	.26**	.31**	—		
Prejudicial feelings	3.51	1.34	.35**	.36**	.23**	—	
Support for affirmative action policies	2.65	1.21	-.16**	-.20**	-.11*	-.14**	—

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics*

The descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for the endogenous variables included in the hypothesized model are included in Table 1. Stereotypical beliefs regarding African American criminality and laziness were fairly high. As expected, these stereotypes were positively, strongly, and significantly correlated with one another. Scores for internal attributions for failures of African Americans were slightly high. There was a moderate significant bivariate correlation between stereotypical beliefs and internal attributions for failures. Reported means for prejudicial feelings were somewhat lower. There was a moderate positive correlation of prejudicial feelings with stereotypical beliefs and internal attributions. Average scores for support for affirmative action were quite low. In line with expectations, affirmative action support was significantly and negatively correlated with stereotypical beliefs, individual attributions, and prejudicial feelings.

Table 2 provides a comparative breakdown of the means and standard deviations for each of the endogenous variables for participants in the stereotypical media exemplar condition versus in the counterstereotypical condition. Beliefs about criminality and laziness of African Americans in real life were significantly lower for those in the counterstereotypical condition as compared to those in the stereotypical condition. A similar pattern was observed for attribution scores. That is, participants in the stereotypical condition reported higher internal attributions for African American failures as compared to those in the counterstereotypical condition although these differences were not significant. With regard to support for affirmative action, participants who were exposed to counterstereotypical exemplars reported more support than those in the stereotypical condition but these differences did not attain statistical significance.

### *Preliminary Analyses*

Before proceeding with the structural equation modeling, preliminary two-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) determined the main effects and interaction effects of the two independent variables "Exposure to in-group media exemplars" and "Exposure to out-group media exemplars" for the five dependent measures: "Stereotypical beliefs

**Table 2.** Differences in Scores for Variables in the Hypothesized Model for Participants Exposed to Stereotypical African American Media Exemplars Compared to Participants Exposed to Counterstereotypical African American Media Exemplars

Variables	Stereotypical		Counter-stereotypical		<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Stereotypical beliefs about criminality	4.99	0.96	4.82	0.96	0.09
Stereotypical beliefs about laziness	4.90	0.90	4.65	1.00	0.05
Internal attributions for failures	4.40	1.49	4.30	1.51	—
Prejudicial feelings	3.49	1.31	3.56	1.41	—
Support for affirmative action policies	2.60	1.21	2.71	1.20	—

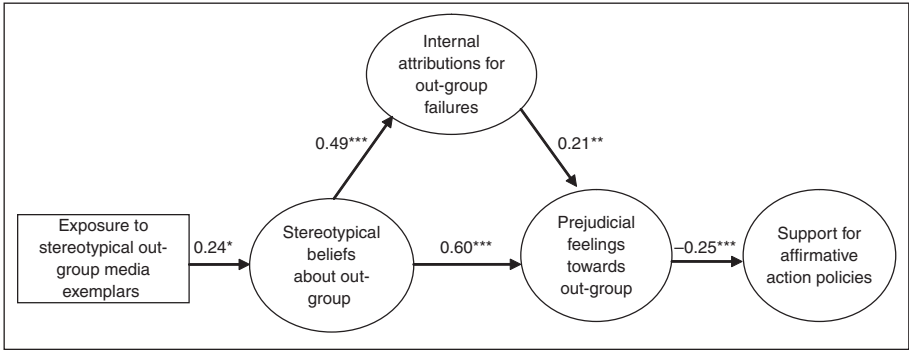
about African American criminality,” “Stereotypical beliefs about African American laziness,” “Internal attributions of African American failures,” “Prejudicial feelings toward African Americans,” and “Support for affirmative action policies.”

The main effect of “Exposure to out-group exemplars” on the dependent measures reached marginal significance; Wilks’s  $\lambda(5, 352) = 1.89, p = .096, \eta^2 = 0.026$ . As a follow-up, individual analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that those who were exposed to negative out-group exemplars ( $M = 4.89, SD = 0.063$ ) were significantly more likely than those exposed to positive out-group exemplars ( $M = 4.63, SD = 0.080$ ) to report stereotypical beliefs about African Americans as lazy;  $F(1, 359) = 5.875, p \leq .05, \eta^2 = 0.016$ . No other main effects or interaction effects appeared.

### Structural Model

The results suggest that the hypothesized model is consistent with the data. The strong fit, as evidenced by  $\chi^2(df = 108, p = .000) 198.90$ ; CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.048 (90 CI: 0.038-0.059) is clear indication. Collectively, these estimates indicate support for the hypothesized model. As illustrated in Figure 2, exposure to the stereotypical rather than counterstereotypical out-group exemplars increased stereotypical beliefs relating to perceived laziness of African Americans, which in turn led to internal attributions for failures of African Americans, increased prejudicial feelings toward African Americans, and ultimately reduced support for affirmative action policies.

Focusing on the specific paths within the model (see Figure 2) revealed that those who saw stereotypical rather than counterstereotypical African American media exemplars reported stronger beliefs about African American laziness ( $\beta = 0.24, p \leq .05$ ) suggesting that the nature of out-group media characters that participants are exposed to can influence viewer perceptions of the out-group in general. As the next step in the model, there were two paths—one direct and other indirect—linking stereotypical beliefs and prejudicial feelings. The indirect path was via “internal attribution for African American failures,” which is a new variable absent in previous studies on this topic. The direct path, which



**Figure 2.** This diagram illustrates the final Exemplar-Based Model of Policy Reasoning that emerged from this study. The exogenous variable “Exposure to stereotypical out-group media exemplars” was dummy coded such that 0 = counterstereotypical exemplars and 1 = stereotypical exemplars. Solid lines indicate significant paths (\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ ).

suggests a strong positive correlation between stereotypical beliefs and prejudicial feelings was highly significant ( $\beta = 0.60, p \leq .001$ ). The indirect paths indicates a statistically significant, strong, positive correlation between stereotypical beliefs and internal attributions ( $\beta = 0.49, p \leq .001$ ) and between internal attribution and prejudicial feelings ( $\beta = 0.21, p \leq .01$ ). As expected, a highly significant, negative correlation between prejudicial feelings and support for affirmative action policies ( $\beta = -0.25, p \leq .001$ ) is apparent.

The statistically significant, direct relationship between stereotypical beliefs and support for affirmative action policies in the cognitive-affective model of policy reasoning (Ramasubramanian, 2010) became nonsignificant when “Internal causes for out-group failures” was included as a mediating variable, strengthening the notion that this is an important explanatory variable in media stereotyping processes. These relationships suggest a complex model of policy reasoning linking exposure to media exemplars and policy opinions.

## Discussion

The present study highlights that even a brief exposure to out-group media characters can alter viewers’ beliefs about the out-group, influence causal attributions for viewers’ beliefs, and shape viewers’ level of support for governmental policies promoting out-group causes. When viewers saw negative, stereotypical African American media personalities, they reported greater stereotypical beliefs, more internal attributions, increased hostile feelings, and an overall lack of support for affirmative action policies as compared to when they saw counterstereotypical, positive African American media characters. These findings support the hypothesized exemplar-based model of policy reasoning.

The findings offer empirical support for the idea that racial attitudes and race-related policy preferences are guided, at least in part, by situational factors. The subset of positive

and negative African American media characters presented in this specific context was sufficient to trigger a series of related beliefs, feelings, causal interpretations, and policy judgments. Future research should consider individual differences based on preexisting racial attitudes. Perhaps plausible, for instance, is that a highly prejudiced individual's racial attitudes might not be swayed by positive exemplars just as one would expect that a non-prejudiced person might be relatively unaffected by negative exemplars.

Entertainment scholars have long suggested that fictional narratives can be quite persuasive, but this idea has not yet been experimentally validated in the context of support for race-related policy decision making. Media personalities from racial/ethnic out-groups seem to represent much more than just characters in fictional plots. Rather, a few exemplars seem to be sufficient for participants to comfortably extrapolate their traits and characteristics to represent the entire out-group. Interestingly, participants did not seem to apply similar generalizations for media characters from their own in-group, possibly because they see negative in-group members as outliers who are atypical of their own group.

The findings are consistent with the appraisal generalization perspective (Bodenhausen et al., 1995), which suggested that exposure to a few counterstereotypical media exemplars can bring about a definite shift in racial attitudes (Power et al., 1996; Ramasubramanian, 2007; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007). They suggest that the more dominant group members see counterstereotypic, positive media characters of color, the more likely that such exposure undermines existing negative stereotypical beliefs even when expending little effort to reduce stereotypical inclinations. In other words, just the simple presence of counterstereotypical characters of color in entertainment shows can bring about significant attitude change even in the absence of motivation or cognitive resources to do so.

Applying the same reasoning to stereotypical exemplars, the findings from the current investigation could be similarly interpreted to mean that negative media characters increase negative stereotypical beliefs, internal attributions, and lack of pro-minority policy support. Future research should include a control condition in which participants remain unexposed to any media exemplars. Such a scenario would test if these outcomes are because of stereotype reduction brought about by positive exemplars or because of stereotype activation by negative exemplars.

Findings support the notion that media characters activate stereotypes of African Americans among White audiences in ways that are likely to attribute responsibility for social issues to the individual victims (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Iyengar, 1990; Pan & Kosicki, 1998; Sotirovic, 2003). The overwhelming tendency of White audiences to use accessible media exemplars in shaping their opinions relating to public policies raises important concerns for scholars whose interests are in political communication and heuristic policy decision-making. The evidence here suggests that circumstantial processes are sufficient to activate and buffer political reasoning for important race-related policy issues based on perceptions of popular culture icons from the racial out-groups. In other words, political behaviors and public opinions about attributions of responsibility are not stable dispositions but are in fact malleably susceptible to even subtle cues in media frames and exemplars.

Racial cues in the media shape viewers' notions of internal attributions for out-group failures, which indirectly influence support for policies such as affirmative action. Inversely, the constant portrayals of African Americans as irresponsible and criminal in media further reinforces this sequence of associated reasoning that expresses itself as lack of support for pro-minority policies. These tendencies could help explain why affirmative action policies are contentious in American politics despite White Americans' claims of holding pro-Black attitudes and believing in egalitarianism.

An alternative explanation for the study findings could be that schematic processing rather than exemplar-based processing of information resulted in changes in viewers' perceptions, attributions, and policy support. Research on schema change shows that counter-exemplars can change existing schemas through conversion, bookkeeping, or subtyping processes (see Schneider, 2004, for more details). According to the conversion model, exposure to extreme counterexemplars suddenly, abruptly, and completely changes perceivers' attitudes. The bookkeeping model assumes that changes happen more gradually, based on the mental tallying of stereotypical-confirming versus stereotype-disconfirming information available to the individual. The subtyping model of schema change suggests that perceivers will treat counterstereotypes as exceptions, thus preserving their original stereotypical beliefs intact. More research is needed to understand how counterstereotypical media exemplars influence schema change.

Overall, the exemplar-based model of policy reasoning, empirically tested in this study, contributes to the literature in multiple ways. First, it suggests that media characters of color act as exemplars of out-groups who prime stereotypical beliefs, feelings, and even influence support for policies. This study adds to existing literature that illuminates how entertainment programming plays a significant role in influencing heuristic policy decision-making. Second, by using an experimental design, it provides greater internal validity for the logic of how media characters serve as exemplars in affecting audiences' racial attitudes and support for pro-minority policies. Finally, the inclusion of "Internal attributions for out-group failures" as a mediator in the model further clarifies existing policy reasoning models by suggesting that stereotypical beliefs lead to more internal attributions that in turn activates hostile feelings toward an out-group.

Despite these contributions, several limitations need to be considered. Future research could benefit from testing similar models for Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. African American media characters are more prevalent in the current media scenario, making them more recognizable and easy to locate for this research project. Replicating this study with different sets of respondents, preferably noncollege-aged populations would also be beneficial. In particular, the effects of media characters of color on racial/ethnic minority populations would be especially helpful in understanding how portrayals of Whiteness as normative and other out-groups as inferior could lead to harmful self-stereotyping effects on Black viewers. One recurring concern with studies on racial prejudice is that participants often feel obligated to report that they are much less prejudiced than what they are. Although several measures were taken to address these concerns, future studies would benefit by including implicit measures of racial stereotypes apart from the self-reported explicit measures employed here.



This investigation provides some intriguing insights into the context-sensitive nature of racial attitudes by illustrating how temporarily activated media celebrity exemplars shape much more than just social judgments but even public policy decisions. Several more questions still remain unanswered: What types of exemplars have effects for how long, and on what kinds of audiences? The relationship between short-term activation and long-term shifts in policy remains an interesting domain that invites further investigation.

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### Notes

1. Whereas Rachel Green (*Friends*) and Jack Bauer (*24*) represented admirable White media characters, Jerry Springer (*The Jerry Springer Show*) and Paris Hilton (*The Simple Life*) exemplified disliked in-group media personalities. In terms of African Americans, although Oprah Winfrey (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*) and David Palmer (*24*) were used to signify positive, counterstereotypical African American media characters, Flavaflav (*The Flavor of Love*) and Omarosa (*The Apprentice*) were used as exemplars for stereotypical, negative media personalities. These characters were selected based on inputs provided in an informal pretest of media characters conducted in a classroom setting where participants, similar in profile as those in the final study, circled the most admirable and most disliked characters from a list provided to them.
2. Given the paucity of television shows that feature both African American and White American stereotypical and counterstereotypical characters simultaneously at the time of conducting this experiment, media exemplars were selected across genres. However, to avoid possible program-specific confounds such as storyline, genre, and formal features, photographs of media characters rather than actual video clips from the television shows were used as stimuli.

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## **Bio**

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