The **Opportunity** Agenda

Building the National Will
to Expand Opportunity in America

Social Science Literature Review:

Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys

Acknowledgments

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About
The Opportunity Agenda

The Opportunity Agenda was founded in 2004 with the mission of building the national will to expand opportunity in America. Focused on moving hearts, minds, and policy over time, the organization works with social justice groups, leaders, and movements to advance solutions that expand opportunity for everyone. Through active partnerships, The Opportunity Agenda synthesizes and translates research on barriers to opportunity and corresponding solutions; uses communications and media to understand and influence public opinion; and identifies and advocates for policies that improve people's lives. To learn more about The Opportunity Agenda, go to our website at www.opportunityagenda.org.

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Executive Summary

This social science literature review focuses on the question of how media, and communications more broadly, affect outcomes for black men and boys in American society. The summary is intended to offer communicators — who come to the review with a wide range of backgrounds and depth of knowledge on the topic — a digestible overview of an extremely rich and varied body of research. It reviews a significant set of materials, representing many of the key approaches and themes that characterize the scholarship as a whole.

There are many, many forces — material, historical, cultural, and political — that shape and constrict the life chances of black males in the U.S. Some of these are long-standing legacies that may take generations to shift. But in other ways, the social, economic, and symbolic place of African-American men and boys is re-created and reinforced every day. In particular, public perceptions and attitudes toward black males not only help to create barriers to advancement within this society, but also make that position seem natural or inevitable. Among the most important mechanisms for maintaining (or changing) these perceptions are the mass media with their significant power to shape popular ideas and attitudes.

This study looks at the evidence scholars have gathered and the conclusions they have drawn about how media present a picture of black males and how this representation affects not only attitudes toward black men and boys but their actual life chances. It also explores whatever guidance the social science research offers for changing media practices and resulting black male outcomes for the better.

For the most part, we limit the discussion to "what is known" by social scientists looking at this field — based on experimental or other empirical evidence (as opposed to a cultural criticism approach, for instance), or on a consensus reached by scholars. At certain points throughout the review we offer perspectives based on our own empirical research into the framing of a wide range of social issues.

The core problem

The review focuses on the core problem as social scientists have described it — a troubling link between media portrayals and lowered life chances for black males. The review breaks this story down into several components.

Distorted patterns of portrayal

A robust body of research documents how the overall presentation of black males in the media is distorted in a variety of ways, relative to the real-world facts. While individual studies tend to focus on a single genre or medium — such as TV fiction shows, magazine advertising, or video games — the research taken as a whole reveals broad patterns, including:

> *Underrepresentation overall* — for instance, as characters in video games; as "talking head" experts called in to offer perspectives and analysis in the news; as computer users in TV commercials; as users of luxury items in print ads; and as "relatable" characters with well-developed personal lives (*e.g.*, fathers) in fiction shows and films.

Negative associations exaggerated — particularly criminality, unemployment, and poverty. The idle black male on the street corner is not the "true face" of poverty in America, but he is the dominant one in the world as depicted by media.

Positive associations limited — particularly, sports, physical achievement in general, virility, and musicality. While the media's version of America is populated by some black males intended to inspire, they tend to represent a relatively limited range of qualities to the exclusion of a variety of other everyday virtues.

The "problem" frame — Due to both distortions and also accurate and sympathetic discussion, black males tend to be overly associated with intractable problems.

Missing stories — Many important dimensions of black males' lives, such as historical antecedents of black economic disadvantage and persistence of anti-black male bias, are largely *ignored* by the media.

Causal link between media and public attitudes

Naturally, the reason so much attention is devoted to media representations is that the collective image of blacks and black males has important effects. Many researchers discuss how distorted portrayals can be expected to create problematic understandings and attitudes among audiences, including:

- General antagonism toward black males;
- Exaggerated views of, expectations of, and tolerance for race-based socio-economic disparities;
- Exaggerated views related to criminality and violence;
- Lack of identification with or sympathy for black males;
- Reduced attention to structural and other big-picture factors;
- Public support for punitive approaches to problems.

Studies show that media images have the greatest impact on perceptions when viewers have less real-world experience with the topic; in other words, the "media world" can be mistaken for the real world, unless audiences have sufficient personal experience to counteract its effects.

Even audiences with real-world experience are not immune. Studies show, for instance, that stereotypic images depict black women as contributing to their domestic victimization by their black male partners. Considering these distorted images, it is not surprising that black television viewers, male and female, tend to lose more "social capital" through viewing TV programming — *i.e.*, to trust the community and those around them less in ways that can lead to reduced prosperity and other outcomes.

Impacts on thinking of black males themselves

Black males obviously draw on far more experience than others to form images of themselves and their peers. However, they are also members of the public, and they are not immune to the influence of the media, which they consume just as other Americans do.

Specifically, scholars state that images in the media have a negative impact on black perceptions of self, though there is no shared consensus on how exactly this plays out. Various mechanisms may be at play:

- Negative media stereotypes (thugs, criminals, fools, and the disadvantaged) are demoralizing and reduce self-esteem and expectations. Dealing with negative expectations may also create stress and drain cognitive resources in some contexts — leading to the lowered performance associated with "stereotype threat."
- The most common "role models" depicted in media (*e.g.*, rap stars and NBA players) imply limited options.

Additionally, scholars have explored the ways in which black males can come to internalize biases and stereotypes and then, through their words and actions, reinforce or perpetuate those distortions.

Documentations of conscious and unconscious bias

Another robust area of study focuses on mapping current attitudes towards blacks and black males — which presumably have been and continue to be shaped by the media. Many of the most disturbing results come from cleverly designed psychology experiments, which limit people's ability to disguise or hide biases that they know are not socially acceptable. For instance:

- The amygdala, a brain region associated with experiencing fear, tends to be active when whites view an unfamiliar black male face (regardless of their conscious reports about racial attitudes).
- After "seeing" unknown black faces flashed at subliminal speeds (too rapidly to consciously perceive), whites tend to show more hostility in various contexts — leading to a breakdown of social connection between different races.
- Whites tend to more easily associate negative words (*e.g.*, *terrible*, *failure*, *horrible*, *evil*, *agony*, *war*, *nasty*, and *awful*) with unknown black faces, as opposed to white faces.
- Some studies indicate that many African Americans have an implicit bias *against* unknown faces of their own race, similar to biases shown by whites against blacks.

Explicitly measured attitudes towards African Americans or racial policies have not changed significantly since the election of Barack Obama.[1]

Practical consequences in lives of black males

Finally, of course, distortions in the media are ultimately significant because of the real-world effects they have on black males' outcomes, which can be negatively affected any time a black male is in a position where his fate depends on how he is perceived by others, particularly whites, or on what kind of rapport he has with them.

The real-world effects alluded to in the literature include everything from less attention from doctors to harsher sentencing by judges, lower likelihood of being hired for a job or admitted to school, lower odds of getting loans, and a higher likelihood of being shot by police. For example, various experimental simulations have shown that whites are more likely to "shoot" an unarmed black male than an unarmed white male.

1 For more discussion of explicit attitudes, see *A Review of Public Opinion Research Related to Black Male Achievement*, The Opportunity Agenda, October 2011.

Why media patterns are distorted

In order to combat the destructive causal dynamics delineated so far, communicators must confront the question of *why* black males continue to be underrepresented, framed in negative ways, offered limited roles in both fictional and news contexts, and so forth. Scholars have offered a number of suggestions about the causal factors leading to the distortions and omissions.

Producer bias — Most obviously, those responsible for media content may at times present a distorted, inaccurate view because of their own conscious or unconscious biases and stereotypes.

Incorrect assumptions about audiences — Scholars suggest cases in which portrayals are incomplete or distorted because producers of media content carry faulty assumptions about the composition of their audiences and their audiences' preferences. For instance, video game producers, who tend not to be African-American males themselves, underestimate how many black males and others who would identify with black protagonists play the games.

Audience preferences — In some cases, content producers may be responding to *accurate* assessments of their audiences' comfort zones with a certain range of presentations of black males — *i.e.*, ones that confirm their own fears and prejudices or reassure them that black males are not achieving "undue" power and status.

Lack of input from black constituents — One of the factors seen as most significant by scholars is the paucity of African-American television station owners, producers, journalists and experts invited to contribute content, etc.

Political motivations to traffic in stereotypes — Portrayals are also distorted by some (often white and/or conservative) communicators' interests in tapping into racial bias in order to promote or discredit various policies (*e.g.*, more prisons, less welfare).

"Prescriptive" studies

The vast majority of social science literature on this topic focuses on mapping out the problems relating to black males and the media, and is essentially descriptive — that is, it describes and analyzes existing patterns in the media, in thought and behavior. Prescriptive studies, explicitly setting out to identify proven courses of action, including empirically testing hypotheses about what might help improve matters, are relatively absent from the literature.

These would hypothetically include, for instance, studies about what happens when media representation of black males is fuller, more accurate and more sympathetic, or what kinds of media patterns help make people less biased, or lead to better outcomes. There are a few exceptional studies that offer this kind of evidence, such as political scientist Shanto Iyengar's experimental finding that news stories about racial discrimination helped reduce the tendency to blame individuals for outcomes (Iyengar, 1991); and a study showing that a combination of explicit training about stereotypes plus exposure to a series of "counter-stereotypical" news stories can help reduce unconscious bias. (Ramasubramanian, 2007) By and large, however, the social science literature offers relatively little evidence about what "works" when it comes to media representations of black males, or about other critical questions of guidance on how to effectively bring about changes in media representations, or how to talk about critical issues such as structural bias.

Much of the "good news" in the research comes from laboratory studies of tasks or conditions that reduce implicit bias. For instance, various tasks that force subjects to think of African Americans as individuals end up reducing unconscious bias (*e.g.*, asking subjects to practice distinguishing one black

face from another, or asking them to speculate about which of a random set of vegetables an unknown black person might like).

More explicit types of training also have very promising effects. For instance, subjects who undergo 45 minutes of intensive practice at rejecting stereotypes — literally clicking "No" when viewing a black face paired with a stereotypical description — showed a resulting reduction in implicit bias. Researchers liken the training (which cannot be accomplished more quickly) to practicing a new physical skill. (Kawakami et al., 2000)

While studies like these do not look directly at media or public discourse, are often not targeted at thinking about black males *per se*, and do not offer concrete suggestions for advocates to act on, they at least offer interesting food for thought for communicators interested in reducing bias on a societal scale.

Dilemmas and deep challenges

As noted earlier, scholars have suggested a number of reasons why patterns of portrayal of black males may be distorted across a wide range of media. Unfortunately, dealing with the problem may be even more complex than that discussion suggests. Recruiting more African Americans into media content production, for instance, or correcting producers' assumptions about the makeup of their audience, still may not address some of the fundamental obstacles to constructive thinking and dialogue on race-related issues, as pointed out by social scientists. Many of these are areas of active research and debate, so a firm consensus about their exact dynamics and significance are still being worked out.

The difficulties of structural thinking — For both cultural and cognitive reasons, it is difficult for Americans to focus on the idea that individuals are not fully in charge of their own fate. Regardless of racial attitudes, systemic and structural explanations for social outcomes are extremely challenging to convey.

Anxiety and "the other" — Anxieties tangential to race, *e.g.*, about terrorism or loss of a job, tend to promote a more conservative outlook, including negative attitudes towards those perceived as "others." In a time period in which anxiety is particularly prevalent, it is predictable that racial attitudes will deteriorate and policy preferences will shift in directions that do not favor "out-groups," such as black males.

Fundamental/universal challenges to race relations — Some social science suggests that relations among people of different races must always overcome some fundamental obstacles. For instance, there is a consistent body of evidence showing that people have more trouble differentiating the faces of other-race individuals — not just whites looking at black faces, for instance, but also blacks looking at white faces. Given the importance of individuation as opposed to stereotyping, this face-recognition finding suggests a basic, though not insurmountable, challenge inherent in interracial relations.

Causation vs. correlation — Much of the available social science is able to point to correlations between, for instance, race and health outcomes, without being able to state the causes with strong confidence. The problem for communicators is that unless causation is clearly and persuasively presented, audiences will inevitably insert their own ideas about causation based on their preexisting understandings and biases.

Warts-and-all vs. idealization — There is considerable debate about the reality that some black men, like all human beings, at times contribute to their own obstacles. While discussing this fact can trigger the default perception that they are always and entirely to blame for their

circumstances, not discussing these choices evokes charges that communicators are not realistic or are not asking enough of black men.

Black masculinity as the problem — Hypersexuality, violence, misogyny, and elite athleticism are extreme versions of stereotypical male qualities, and each is used to caricature and stereotype black males in particular. Yet addressing the issue can mean confronting the idea that black males may embrace these stereotypes as a form of resistance to various external limitations on their achievement. There is no easy consensus about how best to handle these patterns — *e.g.*, some scholars condemn black males' embrace of these images while others focus on explaining and contextualizing it.

Appeal of a color-blind society — The idea of a color-blind society is appealing to many Americans for a variety of emotional and ethical reasons — *i.e.*, it can seem both more fair and less stressful. However, those who advocate for a color-blind society are often responsible for suppressing discussions of race that are ultimately essential for addressing disparate obstacles.

Implicit prejudice as a political tool — Communicators must contend with a pattern of "codes" (*e.g.*, words like "urban") used for stoking or taking advantage of racial tensions in order to promote their desired outcomes, such as cuts to social services.

Communication vs. contact — Finally, some of the social science literature suggests that actual social contact between black males and others may be one of the most critical factors in changing perceptions and outcomes. If this is the case, then communications *per se*, no matter how well done, may ultimately have limited effects, except to the extent that they help break down the forms of isolation and segregation that marginalize black males.

Looking forward

While the social science literature does not offer a great deal of specific guidance about ways forward, it does suggest a number of ideas that communicators should keep in mind about how to proceed.

Most straightforwardly, communicators and advocates must continue to work to create fuller and more accurate portrayals of black males in the media — through education and external pressure targeted at media producers, through production of new images, and by working to embed more African Americans in all links in the media production chain.

Communicators must also wrestle with significant challenges regarding how to speak most effectively about the topic, in order to take the best advantage of communications opportunities — *e.g.*, how to offer a clear and compelling picture of "invisible" systemic forces that stack the odds against black males in a range of areas. Our own research experience across a range of issues suggests that this is a very important challenge for communicators to tackle: Until people are helped to see the systemic forces that insiders are talking about (whether these have to do with economics, children's well-being, the environment, or any other topic), even sympathetic audiences can draw the wrong conclusions about what is causing problems and how to address them.

Offering clear new pictures of large-scale causality is obviously very challenging, but may also be essential. It may help communicators get past vexing dilemmas, and help them address topics about which it is difficult to engage in constructive dialogues. For instance, discussion of gangs can easily promote fear of individual gang members, but an effective bigger-picture story might help focus attention on the lack of alternative opportunities for social and economic advancement in some communities.

Our research experience also suggests that hopeful stories and novel ideas can go a long way towards engaging new audiences and new support, whether in the context of fiction shows, news accounts, press releases, or informal anecdotes. For instance, communicators may make significant headway by focusing on interventions that have made demonstrably positive differences for black males (without obviously "taking away from" other groups). Such stories would be more positive and more novel than the very familiar claims and accusations in this area. Another example of potentially effective novelty would be an explanation of the phenomenon of implicit bias — surely unfamiliar to most Americans — and how widespread it is. But note that such discussions are more likely to be effective if they focus on objective description and explanation rather than moralizing (see below). Discussion of the factors known to reduce implicit bias might also be the basis for positive *and* hopeful stories about race.

The research strongly suggests that censure is an ineffective intervention in most communications contexts. It is likely to trigger resistance and more negative racial attitudes. (On the other hand, it may be an effective threat against public figures, for instance, who may act based on political calculation rather than feelings.) This finding challenges communicators to find ways of talking that rely on motives other than shame or guilt. It may be effective to point out the manipulative uses of race in the media and public discourse. While it is generally not very effective to simply argue that a particular perspective is wrong (*i.e.*, "myth busting"), some of the social science evidence suggests that explicit inoculation against *people trying to manipulate us* can be very effective, and the strategy of opening people's eyes to how they are being duped has been effective in other issues areas, such as cigarettes.

Communicators should also keep in mind that any of their efforts that can help promote greater contact between African-American males and others may be among the most effective steps they can take.

Introduction

This social science review centers on the topic of how communications in the broadest sense impacts black male achievement. It is no exaggeration to say that tens (or hundreds) of thousands of pages have been written on the topic over the course of several generations. This review is intended to offer communicators on related issues, who come to the review with a wide range of different backgrounds and depth of knowledge on the topic, a digestible overview. What have social scientists studied and learned, particularly in the last decade, about how communications have impacted achievement of black males, and could impact it for the better? A range of longer reviews, including book-length studies, are available and have informed this piece — but The Opportunity Agenda would like to offer its colleagues and the field a user-friendly summary that captures the essence of what is known, and what is not known, in a very usable format.

What is known is often discouraging, as a wide range of studies, analyses, and bodies of evidence point to persistent and destructive biases regarding the public image of black males, and ongoing forces that perpetuate the creation of these images. Equally frustrating is the fact that these patterns, while often very familiar to insiders, are more or less invisible to the general public, and seem implausible or exaggerated to them even when pointed out (an observation based on the authors' own research experience on related topics). Other problems widely known to insiders but mostly "invisible" to the public at large include the well-documented and nearly universal tendency of Americans to have unconscious patterns of bias against African Americans in general and black males in particular, as well as the psychological and sociological costs that these patterns exact on black males. In short, it seems very important that the nature of these patterns of images, their causes, their effects, and their potential antidotes, should in some sense be available "out there."

The review focuses on the core problem as social scientists have described it — including aspects that are more robustly or more thinly addressed in the literature — as well as a discussion of the some of the more troubling dilemmas and dynamics that confront communicators.

Where possible, this review also points out the "good news" in the literature, including psychology experiments that look at tasks and contexts that can reduce bias. Despite the lack of "silver bullets," the literature does offer some useful lessons that can guide communicators' efforts going forward.

Please note that the social science literature review is just one piece of a larger effort. It is intended to provide communicators with an overview of what is known (or not known) about the topic via the social sciences, and to inform future stages of the project; it is those later stages that will focus more on action steps going forward.

Methodology

A literature review is an overview of the published scholarship on a particular topic. In this case the topic is what social scientists know about how and why discourse (especially public and media discourse) shapes perceptions of black men and boys – and the consequences of these perceptions. The review has also sought out findings that offer evidence about *how to talk about black men and boys and achievement* in ways that can promote engagement, understanding, and progress in this area.

The authors of the review relied on four complementary approaches to identifying and selecting relevant and reliable source materials:

- Recommendations from a variety of experts about important, influential works;
- Citations and references in high-profile, popular works;
- Citations in well-regarded, specialized scholarly works (that is, studies and analyses that are accepted and cited by other researchers in the field);
- Our own expertise as academic reviewers and researchers.

The review focuses primarily on findings for which scholars have offered experimental or documentary evidence, or around which scholars in the field have reached a strong consensus. The selection of work is also based on its evident usability, and its potential to help a variety of stakeholders identify the most prevalent and malignant frames and adapt a set of best practices for reshaping them.

A select bibliography is offered for readers who may want to examine relevant research in more detail.

Even a relatively lengthy overview of such a vast field inevitably omits many studies, including important ones, from discussion. We hope, on the other hand, that the review does touch on the most important themes that shape current scholarly perspectives.

Media Portrayals and Black Male Outcomes

From the perspective of most scholars who focus on the topic, there is a clear causal story that links media representations of black men and boys to real-world outcomes. The story can be summarized as follows:

- For various reasons, media of all types collectively offer a *distorted representation* of the lives and reality of black males.
- In turn, media consumption negatively affects *the public's understandings and attitudes* related to black males (sometimes including the understandings and attitudes of black males themselves).
- Finally, these distorted understandings and attitudes towards black males lead to negative *real-world consequences* for them.

Taken as a whole, this is a rich area of study, which many scholars believe is central to understanding and addressing the stubborn challenges faced by black boys and men in American society. (Note that many studies refer to race without explicitly addressing gender, but many patterns, such as exaggerated associations with violence or sports, are clearly more relevant to males than to females.)

For advocates and other communicators concerned with issues related to black male achievement, it is important to be sharply aware of this story, and the findings that support it, so that they can address the problem in an informed way.

Note that other important components of the black male dilemma do not fall within the scope of this paper. Historical legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, the material and economic disparities related to that and other forms of historical racism, the role of the criminal justice system in controlling black males, the flow of resources toward and away from black males, and so on, are all important issues for understanding the current situation for black males in America. They will not be addressed here, however, except insofar as the distorted images in media make it easier for many Americans to tolerate, perpetuate, ignore or discount the many real disadvantages that black males face.

This paper breaks the story down into five "links in the chain" (some of which have been studied and discussed more than others):

- Distorted portrayal of black (male) lives/experience
- Why media patterns are distorted
- Causal link between media and public attitudes
- Documentations of the public's bias — both conscious and unconscious — against black males
- Practical consequences for the lives of black males

Distorted patterns of portrayal

In a wide range of ways, the overall presentation of black males in the media is distorted, exaggerating some dimensions while omitting others. Many scholars have contributed to a robust body of research documenting these distortions, which have several aspects.

Underrepresentation in media portrayals

A number of researchers have essentially conducted "censuses" (of representations overall, of fictional characters, of characters in ads, and so forth) and compared these findings to the numbers of black men and boys that would be expected if racial bias were not at work. As this research has progressed, analysts have grown more sophisticated in the distinctions that they draw about where black males do and do not appear in the media. A pattern reported again and again is that African Americans are *underrepresented* in various facets of the media's portrayal of the world.

For example, although characters of color in video games have been increasing over time, blacks in general tend to be underrepresented especially as active, playable characters in video games. They are more likely to be stock characters in the story.

> …outside of sports games, the representation of African Americans [in popular video games] drops precipitously, with many of the remaining featured as gangsters and street people … (Williams et al., 2009)

Black males also tend to be underrepresented as experts called in to offer commentary and analysis in the news. News programs frequently include "talking heads" invited to help clarify a given topic, but these tend not to be black males. In a 1997 sample of network news clips, black speakers accounted for less than 3 percent of the statements made by experts commenting on various issues. (Entman & Rojecki, 2000, p. 69)

Black males are underrepresented in the roles of computer users or technical experts in television commercials, instead tending to appear in roles that put less emphasis on intellectuality (see below). (Kinnick & White, 2001) African Americans are also underrepresented as users of luxury items in commercials, instead being featured using more pedestrian consumer products. (Henderson & Baldasty, 2003)

In short, the studies paint a picture of an American media landscape that includes fewer black males overall, few associated with technical and other intellectual pursuits, and few who fit Tucker's description of "competent, capable, and successful members of businesses and families who have attained some degree of material wealth." (Tucker, 2007, p. 69)

More subtly, as Entman and Rojecki (2000) point out, even in the cases when blacks appear in the media as sympathetic and competent figures, they tend not to be "relatable" figures with whom the audience is asked to truly identify. They may not have names (black crime victims are often unnamed, as opposed to their white counterparts who are named); they may lack visible family lives (there are many fewer competent and successful black male fiction characters, compared with white characters); and so forth.

In the world as portrayed by the media, life is lived primarily by white (or other non-black) people, with black males, more or less sympathetic, in the background. (See also Bogle, 2003.)

Negative associations exaggerated

While many aspects of black males' real lived experience tend to be missing from the collective media portrayal, some aspects are very much present, and are, in fact, exaggerated.

Perhaps the most-discussed pattern is the association between black males and *criminality*, particularly in television news — where they are not only likely to appear as criminals, but likely to be shown in ways that make them seem particularly threatening (compared with white criminals, for instance).

> Blacks are overrepresented as perpetrators of violent crime when news coverage is compared with arrest rates [but are underrepresented in the more sympathetic roles of victim, law enforcer]. (Entman & Gross, 2008, p. 98, citing Travis L. Dixon & Daniel Linz, 2000)

> … [in a small sample of local Chicago TV news from 1993-1994] stories about Blacks were four times more likely to include mug shots [than stories about Whites accused of crimes]. (Entman & Rojecki, 2000, p. 82)

African Americans are disproportionately represented in news stories about poverty, and these stories tend to paint a picture that is particularly likely to reinforce stereotypes and make it hard to identify with black males. For example, low-income blacks in news stories are more likely to live in slums or urban areas, as opposed to rural areas, than real-world averages would suggest; more likely be entirely unemployed and "idle" (as opposed to working); and so forth. The idle black male on the street corner is not the "true face" of poverty in America, but he is the dominant one in media portrayal. (Clawson & Trice, 2000, updated and confirmed in Clawson et al., 2007)

In the entertainment media as well, these and other associations continue to be systematically perpetuated. Analysts have gone into great detail about the way in which negative images of black males continue to be used for entertainment purposes, whether through traditional imagery of black inferiority (Bogle, 2003) or by using black male characters disproportionately to represent both the victims and perpetrators of violence. For example, one study examined music video violence statistically, for its impacts on adolescents:

> Compared with United States demographics, blacks were overrepresented as aggressors and victims, whereas whites were underrepresented. White females were most frequently victims. Music videos may be reinforcing false stereotypes of aggressive black males and victimized white females. These observations raise concern for the effect of music videos on adolescents' normative expectations about conflict resolution, race, and male-female relationships. (Rich et al., 1998)

Positive associations limited

As discussed, even when black males are presented sympathetically, they tend to be absent from some important types of roles, *e.g.*, as fathers in parenting situations that audiences can relate to. On the other hand, black males are highly visible in other types of roles that can be considered positive. In the world as depicted by the media, blacks frequently excel in sports, and more generally, are associated with physicality and physical achievement — as well as the aggressiveness that usually goes along with this type of success.

In films, their characters tend to have "macho" qualities that are valued by Americans; however, these film representations can also exclude or obscure other everyday virtues.

> … men of color are faced with achieving masculinity [in media representations] through their corporal selves as physical threats (*i.e.*, as athlete or gang member) as opposed to their intellectual contributions. … To be viewed as assertive and aggressive is valued in the culture but comes at the expense of other highly valued qualities … (Messineo, 2008, p. 755)

> Black men [in mainstream print ads], with rare exceptions, are represented as workers, athletes, laborers, entertainers, criminals, or some combination thereof. (Tucker, 2007, p. 70)[2]

In short, the media world is populated by some black males we admire, but these tend to be associated with a relatively limited range of qualities, such as physical ability and/or entertainment skills.

The "problem" frame

A consumer of most of American media can hardly help thinking of black males in terms of *problems*. This is not only because of distortions in the collective media presentation of black males (discussed previously), but also due to patterns that characterize sympathetic and accurate portrayals. For valid and important reasons, mass media, advocacy, and policy-making discourses tend to focus on (real) problems of black males — relating to educational and economic outcomes, family life, or the criminal justice system, for instance.

What are the implications when Americans as a whole strongly associate black males with intractable problems? The challenge, discussed in greater detail in later sections, is that frequent repetition of the problems of black males can obscure other, more positive dimensions of their reality, and worse, can end up reinforcing prejudicial stereotypes. The literature suggests — and the authors' own research experience on a wide range of issues confirms — that an emphasis on negative outcomes often ends up triggering default (false) assumptions about how those problems arose, particularly due to faulty personal choices.

> Even if the proportion of Black victims and criminals were to reflect defensibly "accurate" readings of actual crime patterns, *in the absence of contextual explanations*, the heavy prominence of a racial minority in these stories of violence may worsen negative stereotyping. (Entman & Rojecki, 2000, p. 81)

> Negative stereotyping of minorities is often (if inadvertently) reinforced in newspaper reporting that addresses race-based health disparities. For example, [an article on high HIV rates among black males] reinforces negative stereotypes of Black men as threats not only to their own women and children, but to society at large . . . Because the article does not offer any underlying, structural reasons for the disparities mentioned . . . it ends up reinforcing negative racial stereotypes about Black criminality, drug use, destructive sexuality, and inadequate fatherhood. (Aubrun et al., 2007)

Advocates need to carefully consider the costs of such narratives, if they predominate to the exclusion of more positive narratives and images. (See discussion of "Dilemmas and Deep Challenges.")

Missing stories

The media are principally in the business of story-telling, whether through journalism, fictional narrative and entertainment, reality TV, and even advertising, video games and music videos. Some analysts have tried to look not only at the kinds of characters that black males do or do not play, but also the kinds of stories that are told about them, or not told about them. Although we do not find much in the way of systematic or statistical censuses in the sociological literature, there are a couple of observations that seem clear.

2 See also Eschholz et al., 2002.

Just as important as the patterns of distortion and exaggeration discussed so far is the fact that many important dimensions of black males' stories are largely *untold* in the media — in particular how the lives of black men and boys are affected by larger contexts, such as historical antecedents of black economic disadvantage, persistence of anti-black male bias, and relative disconnection from the social networks that help create wealth and opportunity.

> The media contribute to the *denial* component of racial sentiments mostly by what they usually omit. Examples include: the pervasiveness of present-day discrimination and, given the importance of capital accumulation, the enormous financial harm still imposed today by discrimination against past generations; the role that poverty and joblessness play in raising crime rates and lowering marriage rates among YMC [young men of color]; and the part played by larger structural changes in the global economy. (Entman, 2006, p. 13)

In short, according to the world as it is presented by the media, the suffering black males can easily be presumed to be solely responsible for their own fates. Without knowing these larger stories, the average person is left to assume that black males are innately or culturally inclined towards low achievement, criminality, and broken families.

In the authors' own analysis of the stories that mass media tell about race,[3] we found that:

> The descriptions in the coverage tend to create and reinforce concrete images of people and families who are doing poorly and people who are "behaving badly." While the focus on tangible, day-to-day problems such as sickness and poverty may help give readers a more vivid picture of disparities, this vividness actually works against bigger-picture understanding which would include more about causes, contexts, and solutions. (Aubrun et al., 2005)

Of course, stories addressing big-picture causality are not entirely absent from the media. For instance, they are a regular topic in the social network site BlackPlanet.com.[4] They also appear sometimes in mainstream media discussions; enough, in fact, to be decried by racial conservatives such as African-American radio host Larry Elder:

> The mostly well-intentioned but condescending members of the mainscream media go the extra mile to avoid having charges of "racist" directed at themselves, so they seldom challenge "black leaders" when these race-baiters confuse equal rights with equal results. Thus, lower black college enrollment becomes "underrepresentation" in higher education; the fact that white net worth exceeds black net worth becomes "disproportionate"; data showing banks decline black loans more readily than loans to whites becomes "discrimination"; blah, blah, blah. (Elder, 2008, p. xv)

But the social science literature makes the overall pattern clear: Consumers of mainstream media receive overwhelmingly more "information" about individual African-American males than about the broader forces that shape their experience.

If advocates are working to help foster a different media environment, and the benefits that would follow, they cannot ignore these missing dimensions of the black male story — even if telling the stories is difficult and often triggers resistance.

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3 The analysis was based on a review of "over one hundred articles collected by the Center for Media and Public Affairs during May and June of 2004 from newspapers in various parts of the country, from Miami to Seattle to San Antonio to Washington, DC."

4 See Byrne, 2008.

Causal link between media and public attitudes

Why study media portrayals? Of course, the reason that so much attention is devoted to media representations (in the broadest sense) is that the collective image of blacks and black males has important effects. Researchers state — sometimes with rigorous evidence, other times through common sense inference — that representations in the media affect viewers' perceptions and, specifically, that distorted portrayals lead to distorted and/or negative perceptions. (Note that some of the evidence comes from studies of other ethnic groups.)

For instance:

- Patterns in portrayals of black men and boys can be expected to promote antagonism towards them.

  > [We] can predict what watching local news might do to us. If subliminal flashes of black male faces can raise our frustration, as shown by the Computer Crash study [in which subjects responded with greater hostility to a crashed computer after being shown subliminal images of black faces], would it be surprising that consciously received messages couched in violent visual context have impact, too? (Kang, 2005, p. 1551)

  > … White Americans tend to develop negative stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans when they depend on television to learn about them. This finding indicates that people are influenced by television images. The more negative images are shown on television, the more likely the viewers pick up the images and develop their stereotypes. (Dong & Murrillo, 2007)

- Patterns in portrayals of black males can be expected to promote exaggerated views of, expectations of, and tolerance for race-based socioeconomic disparities.

  > [M]edia content — not just news but entertainment and "infotainment" — usually promotes White privilege and the idea that Whites occupy the top of a racial hierarchy wherein Blacks are largely and naturally relegated to the bottom. (Entman & Gross, 2008, p. 97)

- Patterns in portrayals of black males can be expected to promote exaggerated views related to criminality and violence.

- Patterns in portrayals of black males can be expected to work against identification with them.

  See Entman and Rojecki's discussion of how television ads are much less likely to place African Americans in positions the audience relates strongly to (for instance, in close-ups, addressing the audience directly, first or last to appear on screen). (Entman & Rojecki, 2000, p. 168)

- Patterns in portrayals of black males can be expected to reduce attention to structural and other big-picture factors.

  > Films that ameliorate White anxieties about Black men by turning them into comics or criminals to be laughed at and/or condemned further the state of racial denial that plagues the United States. … They ease White America's discomfort and make it easy to sidestep its responsibility to acknowledge and to address persistent racial inequalities and conflicts. (Tucker, 2007, p. 102, drawing on Guerrero, 1993)

- Patterns in portrayals of black males can be expected to promote public support for punitive approaches to problems.

  > For instance, presumably due to cumulative effects of viewing TV news that associates black males with crime, "heavy news viewers" in one study were more likely to support the death penalty after viewing crime news stories *that did not even identify the race of the suspects*. (Dixon & Azocar, 2007, p. 229)

An important research question has been whether media representations only *reflect* popular understandings that are already out there — or if they help *create* those understandings through repetition and exposure. A few studies help to directly establish this causal link.

It has been confirmed experimentally that exposure to stereotypical African-American characters and behaviors in entertainment programs has negative impacts on beliefs and attitudes about African Americans, as well as towards affirmative action policies. (Ramasubramanian, 2011)

If media consumption creates distorted understandings and attitudes, then more consumption should lead to more distortion. This is exactly the pattern observed in some studies, particularly when amount of consumption is balanced against amount of real-world experience with black males (or other ethnicities). Media images have the most impact on perceptions when viewers have less real-world experience with the topic.

> [P]ersonal contact is critical to the development of a better understanding of other ethnicities. The more individuals interacted with other people who have different cultural backgrounds, the more likely these individuals could see the positive traits and characteristics of the other people. This finding suggests that human interaction and direct contact are keys to understanding between people and, in particular, among those who have different cultural backgrounds. (Dong & Murrillo, 2007)

> [T]he more television White viewers consumed, the more their evaluations of Latinos reflected their [negative] TV characterization — markedly so when viewers' real-world contact with Latinos was not close, resulting in a greater reliance on televised images in decision making. (Mastro et al., 2007, p. 362)[5]

Impacts on thinking of black males themselves

While black males obviously draw on far more experience than others to form images of themselves and their peers, they are not immune to the influence of the media portrayals, which they consume like other Americans. One of the most important general findings relevant to black males' own thinking is that so-called "stereotype threat" is an important cause of black males' relatively lower performance in certain contexts, such as standardized testing.

Research into stereotype threat usually involves giving people measurable tasks, while at the same time subtly reminding them of the stereotypes that might apply to them. A growing body of research led by Joshua Aronson, Claude Steele, and others shows that when a member of a group that suffers from stereotyping comes into a situation where that stereotype is highly relevant, they experience a number of effects that reduce performance. Increased anxiety, self-consciousness about performance, and efforts to suppress negative thoughts and emotions all use up mental resources needed to perform well on cognitive and social tasks. (Schmader et al., 2008) The more intense the stereotype threat, the more pronounced the impacts on the individual. (Aronson & Steele, 2005) For example, an elderly person, when reminded of how people often associate age with memory loss, will struggle more with memory

5 Also see Hawkins and Pingree, 1990.

tests. (Rahhal et al., 2001) Asian-American schoolgirls did worse than usual on math tests in situations that emphasized their gender (the stereotypical idea is that girls are supposed to be worse at math), and better than usual in situations that emphasized their Asian heritage (Asian Americans are "supposed to be" better at math). (Ambady et al., 2004)

Of course, black males are aware of stereotypes that peg them as unintelligent or under-achieving, and they consistently suffer from the self-handicapping that results from stereotype threat in contexts such as testing or job interviewing.

Interestingly, whites are also subject to a kind of stereotype threat. An experiment showed that when stereotypes about white racism were triggered, white males tended to place more physical and social distance between themselves and blacks, thereby acting in a manner that served to confirm the stereotype. (Goff et al., 2008)

Besides stereotype threat, researchers have also pointed to other damaging effects of media on the thinking of African Americans generally, and black males in particular. For instance, it has been shown that stereotypic images of black women increase their domestic victimization by their black male partners (Gillum, 2002), presumably by shaping males' views of black female characters.

Another study focused on African Americans and "social capital." There are a great many definitions of social capital in the literature, but most will agree that the term refers to people's connections to each other in social networks (both virtual and actual), which provide financial, social, and other opportunities and important benefits. Telephone survey interviews conducted in St. Louis and Kansas City showed that African Americans are particularly vulnerable to diminishment of social capital as a result of media consumption (see Beaudoin & Thorson, 2006). Since blacks tend to watch more television overall, and tend to be especially attuned to representations of blacks (who are often framed negatively), their attitudes towards the people and community around them is negatively impacted, relative to white viewers. The survey showed that those who watched more television had less trust in and interaction with neighbors, lower likelihood of joining groups, and worse perceptions of the town they lived in. Together, these attitudes amount to a loss of social capital, making it less likely that blacks in these communities will be connected to others in ways that lead to improving life chances.

More generally, scholars find that images in the media have a negative impact on black people's perceptions of self and of their communities, though there is no shared consensus on how exactly this plays out. Various mechanisms may be at play:

- Negative stereotypes (thugs, criminals, fools, and other disadvantaged types) are demoralizing and reduce self-esteem and expectations.
- The most common "role models" depicted in media (*e.g.*, rap stars or NBA players) present limited, often unrealistic, options.
- More positive or realistic role models tend to be lacking.

When certain types of negative or limiting images are produced by "black sources," the impact can be particularly strong.

> When these images of sex object and aggressive male are presented as part of the dominant ideology, men and women of color can reject the imagery as imposed from outside. However, when this imagery is presented as from the ingroup, the risks of self-objectification are heightened. (Messineo, 2008, p. 755)

Researchers also have confirmed that the media *creates* rather than *reflects* negative understanding, finding, for example, that the higher the consumption of media, the lower the self-esteem among African Americans. (Tan & Tan, 1979)

Psychological and developmental studies have also begun to look at particular times of life (such as childhood and adolescence) when black boys are most susceptible to media influences, and the psychological strengths or stresses that seem to affect how deeply these influences impact them. (Martin, 2008; Banks & Grambs, 1972)

Documentations of bias — conscious and unconscious — against black males

Another robust and profoundly important area of study focuses on mapping current attitudes towards blacks and black males, whether conscious or unconscious. Most importantly, a rich set of studies, including cleverly designed psychology experiments (especially Implicit Association Tests), makes it clear that many if not most non-blacks have negative unconscious associations with black males, even if they have no consciously biased attitudes. And many African Americans share these negative associations toward their own group.

As Kang observes in an extensive review of "the remarkable findings of social cognition," among other topics:

> Not only do they provide a more precise, particularized, and empirically grounded picture of how race functions in our minds, and thus in our societies, they also rattle us out of a complacency enjoyed after the demise of de jure discrimination. (Kang, 2005, p. 1495)

In this section we review several examples of the findings from this type of literature as well as more traditional investigations of attitude. While the topic of bias *per se* is not part of the scope of this review, it is worth keeping in mind the overall force of these studies, since conscious and unconscious attitudes are certainly shaped at least in part by what people take in from the media.

Unconscious patterns

A variety of reported patterns made use of experimental measures that revealed associations and attitudes we may not even be consciously aware of. For instance:

Automatic responses

At the most fundamental level, there is evidence that the amygdala, a region of the brain that is associated with experiencing fear, tends to be more active when whites view an unfamiliar black male face than an unfamiliar white male face, regardless of their conscious reports about racial attitudes (see Phelps et al., 2000).

Hostility

The "Computer Crash" study mentioned previously suggests that whites, on average, have greater feelings of hostility after seeing the face of an unknown black person, flashed at subliminal speeds, than they do after seeing a white face.

Another experiment involved white participants playing a "Password"-type guessing game. Whenever one player on a two-person team was subliminally primed with a black face, *both* players on the team ended up exhibiting greater hostility as the frustrations of the difficult game mounted, thanks to a vicious circle in which overall social cohesion, cooperativeness, and benefit of the doubt were hindered.

General negative evaluation

Many studies have confirmed that whites tend to more easily associate positive words (*e.g.*, *laughter*, *peace*, *joy*, *friend*, *wonderful*, *love*, *happy*, and *pleasure*) with unknown white faces and negative words (*e.g.*, *terrible*, *failure*, *horrible*, *evil*, *agony*, *war*, *nasty*, and *awful*) with unknown black faces, such as in the study reported by Smith–McLallen et al. in 2006.

African Americans' own implicit biases

Some studies have indicated that many blacks have an implicit bias *against* unknown faces of their own race, similar to the reactions of whites (*e.g.*, see Livingston, 2002).

Conscious patterns

Whether surprisingly or not, research suggests that the election of Barack Obama does not reflect a sea change in attitudes towards African Americans or racial policies in the United States. For instance, Hutchings concludes that "there is no evidence that White support for racial preferences has changed [between 1988 and 2008]." He bases this conclusion on a comparison between responses in these two years to questions such as whether the Federal government should take more active steps to address unfair treatment of African Americans in the job market. In both years, roughly 90 percent of blacks supported that idea, while roughly 50 percent of whites did. Furthermore, "on matters of public policy dealing explicitly with race, there is little evidence that the racial divide is declining among younger cohorts." (Hutchings, 2009, p. 929)

Despite the widely held idea that racism has become socially unacceptable, large percentages of the population harbor very traditional prejudiced views in which black males tend more than non-blacks toward violence, criminality, irresponsibility, hypersexuality, and so on.

Note that the companion piece to this social science literature review will assess key patterns in recent polls and surveys, including much more detail on explicit (as opposed to implicit or unconscious) racial attitudes.

Practical consequences in lives of black males

Usually implicit in the literature, but sometimes explicitly discussed, is the idea that attitudes and biases can lead to real, practical consequences for black men and boys. These attitudes and biases can affect a black male's fate when it depends on how he is perceived by others, even including other blacks, and on what kind of rapport they have with him.

For instance, attitudes (shaped to some degree by media) can and do:

- directly affect the likelihood of being hired or promoted;
- directly affect the likelihood of school admission;
- directly affect school grades;
- directly affect treatment within the justice system;
- directly affect chances of getting loans;
- end up affecting health and life expectancy;
- end up affecting self-realization and individual development;
- end up affecting the state of social policy (*e.g.*, punitive laws and police practices that impact communities).

Scholars have repeatedly documented the range of implications:

> We find that judges harbor the same kinds of implicit biases as others; that these biases can influence their judgment; but that given sufficient motivation, judges can compensate for the influence of these biases. (Rachlinski et al., 2009)

> Biased interpretation can have substantial real-world consequences. Consider a teacher whose schema inclines her to set lower expectations for some students, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Or a grade school teacher who must decide who started the fight during recess. Or a jury who must decide a similar question, including the reasonableness of force and self-defense. Or students who must evaluate an outgroup teacher, especially if she has been critical of their performance. (Kang, 2005, pp. 1518-1519)

> [M]ediated images have many impacts on young men of color that work through their effects on White leaders and White citizens. These are people whose decisions on everything from hiring, to granting bank loans, to teaching or medically treating YMC [young men of color], to voting for officials who make public policies, are influenced by their conscious and unconscious racial views. In turn, those policies have important effects on the relationships, careers, and physical and psychological health of men of color during their youth and throughout their lives. There are well-known, self-reinforcing connections that link together under-funded schools in minority neighborhoods, the disappearance of jobs from the same communities due to global and domestic outsourcing, discrimination by employers who assume that YMC applicants are unreliable, higher rates of crime, lower rates of marital stability, and higher levels of medical problems (including premature death). … [M]edia images play an integral role in perpetuating these vicious circles ... . (Entman, 2006, p. 21)

The most serious possible consequence of negative attitudes concerns the ultimate questions of life and death. Besides the fact that black men are more likely to be sentenced to death than white men for the same crime, several suggestive experimental studies have shown that subjects in a video police simulation are more likely to "shoot" black men (holding objects that may or may not be guns) than white men under the same circumstances (*e.g.*, see Greenwald, Oakes, & Hoffman, 2003).

Why media patterns are distorted

Given the long list of negative effects for black males and for society at large, the question remains: "Why does the media perpetuate this destructive set of images and stereotypes?" Racism is often explicitly condemned in the media, yet black males continue to be underrepresented as positive forces in the mainstream, framed in negative ways, offered limited roles in both fiction and news contexts, and so forth. Why? If communicators are to make a positive difference, they must grapple with the roots of the problem.

The recent research on this question is relatively sparse compared to other topics covered in this review, but a number of scholars have offered suggestions about the causal factors that lead to the distortions. Understanding the causes behind these patterns is an important step towards altering them, or at least contending with them more effectively.

Bias among producers of media

The most obvious potential factor is that the people responsible for media content are deliberately presenting a distorted, biased view. This is certainly a historical fact, at least:

> The media have not been kind to African American males. Throughout America's history, black men, teenagers, and boys too often have been depicted as buffoons, criminals, or oversexed animal-like creatures who lust after white women. That followed a design in this country to maintain an inferior, second-class status for black people, dating from slavery on through the twentieth century. (Diuguid & Rivers, 2000)

Scholars have also pointed to a variety of reasons media representations might be biased and distorted, even in the absence of conscious bias or malicious intent on the part of media elites.

Audience preferences

In some cases, scholars assert that viewer preferences drive the distorted portrayals of black males in the media. Most directly, white audiences, according to one perspective, tend only to be comfortable with a certain range of presentations of black males — *i.e.*, presentations that confirm their own fears and prejudices or reassure them that black males are not achieving "undue" power and status.

> How does one create and market a product to an audience [*i.e.*, the White majority film audience] willing to pay only to see counterfeit representations of African Americans? (Tucker, 2007, p. 103, drawing on Guerrero, 1993)

Less directly but perhaps equally damaging, the pressures to attract an audience lead to a focus on violence and other attention-grabbing topics, that "happen to be" associated with black males.

> These findings [about patterns in news coverage] should not surprise us, given the strong financial incentives to focus on sensationalistic stories such as violent crimes. Financial success of broadcast stations requires high ratings, in order to sell more advertisements at higher rates. … Violent crime news stories frequently involve racial minorities, especially African Americans. (Kang, 2005, pp. 1550-1551)

Incorrect assumptions about what audiences want

If some media content producers are right about what their audiences are interested in, the scholarship suggests that in other cases portrayals of black men are incomplete and distorted because producers of media content have *faulty* assumptions about demand. For instance, video game developers tend to create game characters that mirror stereotypes of players as young white males, rather than the actual market demographics, which include a significant percent of black men and boys.

> [T]he most likely cause for the representation patterns [in popular video games] is a combination of developer demographics [*i.e.*, developers create characters more like themselves] and perceived ideas about game players [*i.e.*, developers create characters that mirror their imagined audience]. (Williams et al., 2009, pp. 830-831)

Lack of input from African Americans

Another clear and compelling hypothesis about distorted media presentations concerns the lack of black input — in various forms — into the production of content. This dearth of representation includes, for instance, limited African-American TV station ownership, and an underrepresentative share of African-American producers, journalists, and experts invited to contribute content.

> Perhaps the most important prerequisite to achieving the journalistic ideal of balance is the requirement of having reliable, legitimate, and credible sources competing to advance alternative narratives … contending elite forces working to impose different frames on the coverage of an issue … . (Entman & Gross, 2008, p. 95)

A Knight Foundation report shows that women and people of color continue to be underrepresented in the positions of journalist and editor. Even as other organizations have succeeded in bringing diversity to the workplace, the news media has lagged. In a 2002 census, over 90 percent of journalists were white. (Lehrman, 2005)

Political motivations to traffic in stereotypes

Scholars point out that communicators can score political points, for example, when they promote resentment about social program spending by tapping into racial bias, a kind of generalized "Southern strategy." For instance, Lucy Williams describes how stereotyped images and misinformation were intentionally inserted into the debate about welfare reform during the Clinton Administration, including:

> the use of direct mail scare tactics, the use of the media through televangelists and talk shows … the rightist critique of media as "liberal," (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), the pressuring of mainstream media through boycotts of advertisers' products and letter-writing campaigns, (Hardisty, 1995) the encouraging of think tank staff and "scholars" to write op-ed pieces — all toward the goal of "stirring up hostilities" and "organizing discontent" (Smith, 1991). … Right spokespersons became regular media stars and newspaper columnists. (Williams, 1997)

Mistaken understandings

Finally, it is worth noting that people may traffic in these stereotypes simply because they have mistaken impressions of the facts. Without being conscious of biased attitudes, producers of media content of all kinds may, consciously or unconsciously, assume that people with low incomes tend to be black, or looking at this another way, that households with black males are likely to be dysfunctional, that discrimination against black males is limited to isolated acts of racial discrimination, and so on.

"Prescriptive" Studies

The vast majority of the social science literature on this topic focuses on problems relating to black males and the media, and is essentially descriptive — that is, it describes and analyzes existing patterns in the media, and in thought and behavior. Since there are so many current patterns that are problematic, much of the scholarship focuses on discovering the scope and details of the problem.

Prescriptive studies are relatively scarce in the literature, especially those that explicitly set out to determine, through the use of empirical evidence, how communicators (in the broadest sense) ought to be addressing the problems and handling relevant topics. The lack of prescriptive social science is related to the gap between theorists and activists noted in Charlotte Ryan's analysis, "Building Theorist-Activist Collaboration in the Media Arena: A Success Story":

> *As currently organized,* academic-based framing theory focuses on frames as fossils – the products or remnants of political discourse. Framing theorists rarely involve themselves in a sustained fashion with working framers, the processes framers employ, or the audiences they mobilize. (Ryan, 2005)

This section reviews these areas where research is thin, if available at all.

Little "good news" about media effects

The studies referred to earlier in this report paint a picture of a deep and complex problem. A distorted portrayal in the media taken as a whole leads to flawed and biased thinking about black boys and men, which in turn leads to significant real-world consequences of various kinds.

Much less apparent in the social science literature is evidence of the good effects that may be created by promoting new patterns of media portrayal. What happens when representation is fuller and more accurate, and more sympathetic? What kinds of media patterns help make people less biased, or lead to better outcomes? What is the evidence (if any) about what "works"? While it is implicit in much of the discussion that changes in the media should lead to beneficial outcomes, there is very little evidence cited on this point.

One exception is political scientist Shanto Iyengar's influential study of the effects of television news choices on viewers' attitudes (*Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*). In an experimental setting, Iyengar showed subjects different types of news stories focusing on African Americans, embedded within longer news segments, focusing on a variety of topics. Subjects were then asked a series of questions regarding their racial attitudes, and the responses were compared based on whether subjects had seen "episodic" stories, coverage focusing on individuals rather than larger trends or forces, or "thematic" stories, focusing on broad, systemic patterns. The result:

> News coverage of black poverty in general and episodic coverage of black poverty in particular increases the degree to which viewers hold individuals responsible for racial inequality. *News coverage of racial discrimination has the opposite effect* [emphasis added]. (Iyengar, 1991, p. 67)

That is, focusing on the outcomes for individuals ends up promoting counterproductive perspectives, while coverage that focuses on systemic discrimination can help move attitudes in a positive direction. Of course, coverage of the latter type is all too rare, as previously noted.

How to influence the media

While some advocates and other actors report successes in influencing media patterns, such as the Maynard Institute's efforts to raise journalists' awareness of how they cover race, the review uncovered no social science literature on the topic of how to effectively intervene in the media. That is, while various social scientists have pointed to the need to change various patterns, there is little guidance available from the research about how to insure the greatest likelihood of success in these efforts.

Clearly, some patterns have changed for the better over the generations, presumably in connection with broad cultural shifts in attitude. But how can advocates most effectively address the media in the contemporary context?

Good news from the laboratory

A review of the relevant literature reveals a large number of social science studies that shed light on hypothetical ways in which the media might potentially help reduce bias against black males. While these studies do not look directly at media or public discourse — and are often not targeted at consideration of black males *per se* — this large body of research on how to reduce bias effects should certainly be of interest to communicators pursuing the same goal on a societal scale.

For instance, one finding that is intriguing, if difficult to apply, is that exposure to comedy (no matter what the subject of the comedy is) appears to make it easier to distinguish other-race faces from each other, a task that can be quite difficult depending on the subject's life experience. The mechanisms are unclear here, and may have to do with links between positive emotional states and cognitive performance overall — *i.e.*, not relating to race in particular. (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2005)

A brief review of some other important examples from the literature follows.

Individuation

Psychology researchers have investigated various "individuation" procedures that can reduce unconscious bias against African Americans, *e.g.*, as measured in Implicit Association Tests. (Implicit bias is measured in tasks where reaction times are so fast that conscious consideration is not possible, and often in contexts where it is impossible for subjects to be aware that racial thinking is being tested.) For instance, when white college students receive hours of practice in distinguishing one black face from another, they ultimately show significantly reduced implicit bias, presumably because practice in thinking of blacks as individuals reduces the unconscious tendency to see them in terms of stereotypes. (Lebrecht, Pierce, Tarr, & Tanaka, 2009)

This individuation practice is helpful because researchers note that whites' unconscious bias against black faces may well represent a default mode of thinking, *i.e.*, "category-based" thinking, in which people are automatically thought of in terms of (often stereotypical) group characteristics — based on age, gender, or race, for instance. (Wheeler & Fiske, 2005)

In another study, subjects were asked to look at a photo of an unknown black face and guess whether the individual would like a particular vegetable (with no particular cultural or emotional significance). In this context, implicit bias was eliminated. The results contrast with a study in which subjects were asked to think about the black individual's age, which appeared to trigger default, category-based perception. Thinking of the face as belonging to an individual with particular tastes works against unconscious bias and stereotypical thinking.

Explicitly "breaking the habit"

Other researchers have found that explicit training in rejecting stereotypes can help to reduce unconscious bias. Study participants who spent roughly 45 minutes doing tasks such as clicking "No" when viewing a black face paired with a stereotypical description (positive or negative) later showed a reduction in their implicitly measured bias — *i.e.*, reaction times so fast they could not have been consciously controlled. Promisingly, the researchers found in a related task (focusing on biases about skinheads) that effects last for at least 24 hours. On the other hand, the researchers found that significantly briefer training periods had no effect — they liken the training to skill learning that requires repeated and intensive practice. (Kawakami, Dovidio, Moll, Hermsen, & Russin, 2000)

In one of the studies most directly related to media (Ramasubramanian, 2007), the researcher examined the effects of a combination of explicit training about stereotypes, plus examples that implicitly worked against stereotypes. Participants saw one of two twelve-minute videos that either explicitly advised them about media stereotypes (the "media literacy" video) or did not (the "control" video). They then read and summarized five brief written news stories, including two that contained either stereotypes about black males (relating to violence and unemployment) or counter-stereotypes (focusing on "gentleness and entrepreneurial success"). Following these exercises, they participated in a standard type of "lexical decision task" in which faster recognition of stereotype words (*e.g.*, lazy, poor, uneducated) indicates that a stereotype is active in the mind. The results indicated that *a combination of "media literacy training" plus seeing counter-stereotypical news stories* reduced the activation of negative stereotypes — though neither by itself had this effect.

Reflex training

Experimental researchers have also found that study participants asked to internalize a particular new *reflexive response* can eliminate unconscious bias in contexts where it usually occurs. For instance, some subjects in the police simulation task discussed earlier were instructed to focus beforehand on the idea that they would think "safe" (rather than "quick") when seeing a black face, and this procedure ended up reducing or eliminating the tendency to "shoot" more unarmed black males. (Stewart & Payne, 2008)

Note that this type of concrete reflex training procedure proves more effective than training officers not to be biased or not to shoot innocent people.

In another study, subjects were asked to repeat the following to themselves three times and then type it out (and told that this would improve their performance): "If I see a person, then I will ignore his race!" And in fact, these subjects too were able to perform the "shooter" task without race-based bias. (Mendoza, Gollwitzer, & Amodio, 2010)

Importantly, this if-then type of reflex training seems more effective than more "abstract" training in avoiding biased behavior.

Reducing stereotype threat

Researchers have designed controlled experiments to explore communications approaches that can lessen the impacts of stereotype threat, especially in tasks related to educational success. For example, teaching college students that intelligence is malleable rather than fixed (Aronson et al., 2002) or that race is socially constructed rather than biological (Shih et al., 2007) reduces the effects of stereotype threat considerably; and teaching people about the nature of stereotype threat itself has shown benefits. (Johns et al., 2005)

While this experimental work does not directly address public/media communications, there is reason to think that some of the lessons from this research could be applicable to changing the way that both blacks and non-blacks interact with stereotypes.

Motivation

Another body of studies has focused on the kinds of motivation that help people overcome prejudiced responses. For instance, several have suggested that *guilt* can be an effective tool for learning to reduce automatic bias. When whites are told that they have had negative reactions to unknown black faces, their level of implicit bias tends to go down when they are tested again. (Monteith, Ashburn-Nardo, Voils, & Czopp, 2002)

The important caveat is that this is much more true for people who already have *internal* motivation to think and act in a less biased way — *i.e.*, people who truly do not want to be biased. This pattern was confirmed in a study that combined an explicit survey of racial attitudes with a test of implicit bias. Whites with an *internal belief* that bias is wrong, but who were not motivated strongly by external judgment of their racial behavior, showed the least signs of implicit bias. (Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002)

On the other hand, *externally imposed* guilt can backfire: Researchers reviewing a body of literature on intentional "stereotype suppression" — *i.e.*, experiments where participants were explicitly asked not to think in biased ways — conclude that this often leads to a "rebound effect," meaning that prejudiced racial thinking can emerge *more strongly* after being suppressed for a particular interval, particularly when the suppression is based on the idea of being judged by others. (Devine & Sharp, 2009)

In short, censure may be an effective tool for eliminating some types of prejudiced behavior in some contexts, but it is not an effective tool for changing damaging patterns of thinking overall.

While these findings suggest potential directions for advocates — *e.g.*, to avoid messages that focus on censure, or to promote programs to "train" Americans to reject bias — other kinds of work are needed in order to take the types of insights described in this section and apply them effectively to the design of real-world communications.

Messaging

Another virtual gap in the social science literature concerns messaging *per se* — *i.e.*, what to say about the issues, how to talk effectively about topics such as racial disparities, structural racism, lingering historical effects, and even the media problem itself (as discussed in section 1). There is substantial research on various dimensions of *portrayal*, but very little on how to talk about or explain key points.

There are certainly some hints in the literature, of course, including learning from public opinion research (which is the focus of the companion report to this social science review). For instance, it seems clear that whites respond more negatively to policy proposals that are framed as helping one group (blacks) at the expense of others, in part because these seem unfair to them, and in part because whites are cued to consider their own self-interest when considering the proposals. (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993)

Confirming this pattern, a study by Franklin Gilliam showed that participants exposed to an explicit statement about the need to treat minorities more "fairly" ended up having the most negative views of policies such as the Earned Income Tax Credit or low-cost home loans for minorities. Some participants read a statement that included the following:

> Whether overtly or more subtly, minorities are treated differently when it comes to such things as getting ahead in the classroom, applying for a home loan, and being able to see a doctor. According to this view, we need to renew our commitment to a just society by devoting more resources to policies that recognize and address fairness in our society. (Gilliam, 2008)

These participants ended up having more negative views of various supports for minorities than participants who saw no such statement or ones who saw statements less overtly geared to helping minorities. Indeed, years of public opinion data confirm the general pattern that whites tend to have a special antipathy for programs specifically targeted at helping blacks. (Steeh & Krysan, 1996)

On the other hand, some researchers echo many advocates' discomfort with avoiding the topic of race. For example in the context of welfare reform:

> There may be good reasons for advocates of a racially fair welfare system to avoid invoking race or high-lighting the disproportionate presence of black recipients on the welfare rolls. On the other side, however . . . such a strategy risks participating in the silence that surrounds racial inequity in the United States; it fails to name or challenge the social and economic processes that make persons of color more likely to need public assistance. (Schram, 2003)

But the central question for this review concerns evidence about which strategies are likely to be effective, and there are at least some indications that communicators don't need to avoid the topic of race in order to be successful.

In one of the few social science studies addressing effective messaging practices that mention race explicitly, Gilliam and Manuel conclude that directly addressing race can be effective if communicators emphasize broad values, rather than focusing more narrowly on discrimination. The researchers found, using a national web-based survey, that messages focusing on ideas like *prevention*, *problem-solving,* and *strengthening all communities* do more to promote health and youth-development policies for minorities than messages focusing on how African Americans receive unfair treatment. (Gilliam & Manuel, 2009)

The more effective messages included statements like the following:

> [P]reventing problems in African American communities is important because they will eventually become everyone's problems. Preventing declining school budgets, restrictive lending practices, and a scarcity of health professionals in African American communities will prevent worse problems in the future.
>
> [E]ffective solutions do exist. Progress can be made if programs are routinely evaluated and the good ones brought to scale in African American communities. … smart states have significantly improved conditions in some African American communities … by raising teacher quality, creating lending policies for buying homes, and increasing the number of health professionals.
>
> The reality is that African American communities are not enjoying the same benefits as the rest of the nation. This happens because the efforts that enhance a community's well-being, like economic development, availability of health care programs, and opportunities for a good education, have not benefited African American communities.

Most other discussions of effective references to race are not social science studies *per se*. For example, after looking at multiple examples of successful and unsuccessful affirmative action campaigns in several states, the Center for Social Inclusion's report "Thinking Change" concludes that, "If the goal is to educate the public about racial and gender unfairness to create long-term support for race and

gender-conscious programs, the evidence seems to suggest that race-neutral strategies will fail." (Note that while this CSI document is not a social science study, it is informed by many of the same studies as reviewed in this report.)

As "Thinking Change" points out, the city of Houston was able to fight back an anti-affirmative action ballot initiative through messaging that explicitly referred to race, though not to blacks. The white mayor repeatedly made the point that "Anglo male contractors got between 95 percent and 99 percent of the business before the affirmative action program got started 12 years ago. Today, they still get 80 percent."[6]

The mayor's argument effectively neutralizes both the fairness and zero-sum perspectives that often stand in the way of support for affirmative action, by emphasizing that whites still get the lion's share of contracts. Another important reason for its success is almost certainly *the mayor's voice* itself. If whites feel confident their interests are being understood and looked after, they are less likely to respond negatively.

This example is a hopeful one, but the authors acknowledge that many factors combine to determine the success of a race-related campaign, such as the particular issue at stake, the messengers, and the organizational effectiveness of each side.

In "Moving from Them to Us: Challenges in Reframing Violence among Youth" (Berkeley Media Studies Group), Dorfman and Wallack discuss a promising framework for discussing issues relevant to black males (and particularly youth):

> The structural racism framework offered by legal scholars Andrew Grant-Thomas and john powell provides a much more complete understanding of the origins and consequences of racism. In this view, whether a person thrives in society is dependent upon the opportunities available, and opportunities are "produced and regulated by institutions, institutional interactions and individuals" together. Those interactions among institutions have a certain gestalt. Scholars liken it to a bird in a birdcage because it's the network of bars working together, not a single bar, that traps the bird. (Dorfman & Wallack, 2009, p. 11)

While there is no reason to disagree that this bigger-picture perspective is desirable, there is little available evidence about how to talk about it in ways that effectively engage mainstream audiences and change their thinking.

For the moment, although some current "how-to" books for messaging in support of racial justice are informed by social science insights — see for example, the guides by Wallack et al. (1999) and Cutting and Themba-Nixon (2006) — these works rely mostly on the experience of practitioners rather than systematic research testing of practices and results.

6 The CSI report draws on a Berkeley Media Studies Group report (*A New Debate on Affirmative Action: Houston and Beyond*, 1998), which in turn quotes Mayor Bob Lanier from *The Houston Chronicle*, Oct. 26, 1997.

Dilemmas and Deep Challenges

This part of the paper steps back from the problems regarding the media and its content considered earlier in the review and looks at some additional challenging dynamics and problems that are noted in the research and that communicators must grapple with.

Put briefly, the problem goes deeper than factors such as how many African Americans are involved in media content production, or the assumptions of content producers about their audiences. These challenges involve fundamental patterns in human cognition (*e.g.*, the difficulty of focusing on systemic as opposed to anecdotal information) as well as dilemmas inherent in a fraught topic where it may be all too easy to offend or alienate one audience while appealing to another, or to trigger one problematic perception while combating another.

The difficulties of structural thinking

As explicit, individual racism (*i.e.*, the attitude that blacks are "inferior") has gradually receded in recent decades, *structural* racism has emerged as a key concept in the analysis of race-biased perception — the idea that there are systemic and institutional barriers that impede racial equality, even if individuals were no longer racially biased (*e.g.*, see "Thinking Change," Center for Social Inclusion, 2005).

Unfortunately, due to fundamental tendencies in human reasoning, there is a natural kind of "cognitive blindness" to patterns that are systemic and statistical in nature (see Aubrun et al., 2005). The result is that most attempts to draw attention to the phenomenon of structural racism meet with resistance and even backlash on the part of broad sections of the American public. The media contributes to this pattern by consistently transforming matters of structural racism into reports that emphasize individual stories and individual outcomes. (O'Neil, 2009)

Unfortunately, the literature offers no clear, evidence-based way forward for addressing this deep challenge more effectively.

Anxiety and "the other"

Many studies have shown that anxieties (*e.g.*, about terrorism, or loss of a job) can lead to a more conservative outlook, including negative attitudes towards those perceived as "other" (*e.g.*, Amodio, 2009; Jost et al., 2007). The result is that communications on issues even remotely connected to race can still end up triggering exclusionary negative racial attitudes, simply by evoking anxious feelings about the world — whether having to do with economic problems, war, or other threats. And in a time period that is particularly anxious for reasons that have little to do with race, it is predictable that racial attitudes and policy preferences will deteriorate.

Fundamental/universal challenges to race relations

This is a rich area of study that attempts to sort out patterns specific to a particular society from potentially more universal aspects of interracial dynamics. Both kinds of factors are certainly relevant

to black male achievement in the U.S., and this review focuses on challenges more specific to this country, since these represent particular challenges that are potentially more amenable to change — *e.g.*, through different patterns of media ownership, or training of journalists.

On the other hand, the universal type of challenge is also worth keeping in mind. For instance, there is a consistent body of evidence showing that people have more trouble differentiating the faces of other-race individuals — and this effect seems to hold when blacks look at white faces, as well as when whites look at black faces (*e.g.*, see Meissner & Brigham, 2001).

Causation vs. correlation

A great deal of social science literature quantifies the disparities in *outcomes* between African Americans and others — *e.g.*, black children suffer disproportionately high rates of obesity. Typically, these studies carefully distinguish between causation (x causes y) and correlations (x and y tend to be related). Causes are harder to prove and establish with confidence, especially in extremely complex situations like school success or incarceration rates, where a number of factors may be at work.

Unfortunately, the resulting focus on outcomes (as opposed to causes) can make social science a problematic resource for communicators. Correlations (*e.g.*, black male-ness and poor school scores go together) are open to different interpretations (*e.g.*, poor test scores are evidence of bias against black males vs. black males are "inherently" less well-equipped for school). In fact, depending on the assumptions that the audience is already making, a communications emphasis on *disparities of outcome* can reinforce people's prejudices rather than drawing their attention to racial injustice.

In some cases, researchers are able to point to disparities in both inputs *and* outcomes, and can explicitly point to causes. For example, a report about race-based health disparities in California highlights the causes rather than the effects, namely that black children receive less physical education in school and have low rates of access to green space and therefore suffer disproportionately from obesity and other problems:

> Much of Los Angeles is park poor, and there are unfair park, school, and health disparities based on race, ethnicity, income, poverty, youth, and access to cars. Children of color disproportionately live in communities of concentrated poverty without enough places to play in parks and schools . . .The human health implications of the lack of physical activity are profound. These children disproportionately suffer from obesity, diabetes, and other diseases related to inactivity. (Garcia & White, 2006)

But in many cases, researchers can only speak with confidence about correlations and disparities of outcome, which may not be as compelling.

Warts-and-all vs. idealization

The first section of the review focused in part on how the media portrayal of black males is *incomplete* — not a full and accurate portrayal of their real nature, lives, and experience. But presenting a full and accurate warts-and-all portrait of black males is problematic because of the well-documented tendency to blame victims for their problems (*e.g.*, see Brown et al., 2003). Advocates face a dilemma in which any discussion of how the actions and choices of black men and boys contribute to their problems can end up reinforcing the idea that black males "have mostly themselves to blame." On the other hand, not discussing black men's choices or their consequences evokes charges that communicators are not realistic, for instance, or not asking enough of black men (see the earlier reference to Larry Elder). Portraying black men and black boys as passive victims of fate has additional drawbacks.

Cognitive scientists and psychologists have described a basic pattern of human thinking — *confirmation bias* — which means that when people are given information, they tend to hear the parts that confirm what they already believe, and disregard the information that contradicts what they believe (*e.g.*, Nickerson, 1998). This pattern creates problems for analysts who want to fully describe the problem of black male outcomes (*e.g.*, relating to success gaps, family dysfunctions, or attitudes towards education), because they run the risk of "confirming" negative biases. There is little empirical research as yet to aid advocates in dealing with this dilemma.

The role of black masculinity

Feminist scholars have pioneered the study of gender as a social construction, overturning the assumption that gender roles are an essential, relatively fixed part of human nature. They have looked at how forces like media, cultural beliefs, ideology, and history all shape people's gender expectations and their lived experience as men or women. Although this kind of analysis initially focused more on whites than blacks and more on women than men, there is a growing, rich literature that treats black masculinity as a similar object of study. (Brooks & Hebert, 2006)

Many analysts take as their starting point the way in which black maleness has interacted with the history of racism. Hypersexuality, violence, misogyny, and athleticism are all exaggerations of maleness that serve to caricature and stereotype black males and black masculinity. (Tucker, 2007; hooks, 2004)

Media imagery of blacks continues to stress gender and sexuality. As mentioned earlier, when it comes to males, the media leans towards individuals such as athletes, rappers, pimps, absent fathers, and criminals. Even "positive" portrayals of black men often highlight variations on these types. The stereotypes play out in both black and white communities, and analysts believe they are a major source of the distortions that interfere with black male success. (Mutua, 2006) In fact these exaggerated masculine types in the media come to symbolize a (narrow) path for success in society.

Most analysts attribute the durability of these attitudes first and foremost to white male anxieties about the threat of black men having sexual access to white women. The caricature of black masculinity has long been both the thing that excuses white oppression and stimulates the fear that motivates it.

On the other hand, addressing the issue can mean coming to grips with how black males themselves may embrace these stereotypes, often as a form of resistance to the lack of power they feel they have to actually shape their lives. In other words, black males, with ample encouragement from the media, may often "confirm" the hyper-masculine stereotypes. Among scholars we find a full range of responses to this dilemma. For instance, media stereotypes of hyper-masculine black males are treated as:

- false biases (Jones, 2009);
- partially true, but exaggerated by race hostilities and the media (Burrell, 2010);
- true, with the implication that black males should get their act together (see Neal, 2006);
- true, though black males are not at fault since:
  - ✓ they unfortunately buy into stereotypes and expectations just like everyone else (Hutchinson, 1996);
  - ✓ they face limitations created by a society that expects black males to behave in stereotypical ways, so that stars and athletes that embody those stereotypes are the ones lionized in popular culture (Tucker, 2007);
  - ✓ many of these behaviors have structural causes (*e.g.*, lack of real power for black men; criminal justice system undermines black family structures, and so on).

In terms of methods, most of the literature is not rooted in quantitative or experimental data. Feminist studies owes much to literary criticism, and most of the studies that look at the media's role in the portrayal of black masculinity are based on interpretation and analysis of particular texts, movies, and television shows. For example, Orbe (1998) looked at MTV's reality show, *Real World*; Dines (2003) analyzed the content of cartoons in men's magazines; and MacDonald (2005) analyzed the television drama *Homicide* to demonstrate how the construction of black masculinity is depicted on television.

The problematic appeal of a "color-blind" society

One of the characteristics of the current period is the assertion that although racism may have been prevalent in the past, it is no longer a significant problem. In fact, asserting that white racism is the source of black people's problems is caricatured as not only excuse-mongering, but a form of "reverse racism." (Schram, 2003)

Of course, most serious scholars treat discrimination and race-based effects as highly significant and current. Moreover, consciousness of race is important to seeing and solving the problem.

> Race consciousness [is] a necessary antidote in order to effectively oppose, resist and reveal the institutionalized, systemic, and normative character of racism . . . moving beyond a liberal individualist framework of analysis, with its stress on "neutrality," "colour-blindness," and "integration" into an otherwise unchanged dominant society. (Warner, 2006)

But scholars have observed that the political right has systematically made use of "color-blind" framing to derail constructive discourse and policymaking to address the effects of discrimination:

> In the Right's view, affirmative action and other programs designed to address institutional racism . . . become both unnecessary . . . and unjust (since they do not discount race and consider individual merit alone). Using polemical and divisive tactics, the Right attacks affirmative action as "racial quotas," "preferential treatment," and "reverse discrimination." It cynically takes the language of the Civil Rights Movement, including the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., himself, to argue that individuals should be judged by their merit and character and not by their skin color . . . And, it warns that preferential treatment accorded to a particular ethnic or racial group will create resentment among others (read Whites). (Aziz, 2002)

One result of this framing has been that the media shy away from explicitly acknowledging bias as an underlying cause for social problems. (Williams, 1997) Advocates or media figures who do insist on bias as a primary cause are attacked for being obsessed with race and therefore part of the problem themselves. As a result, the public discourse about race has become more polarized and toxic, and much less likely to serve as a vehicle for open discussion in media that are often risk-averse when it comes to genuine controversy.

The widely disseminated report from the *New York Times*, "Proficiency of Black Students Is Found to Be Far Lower Than Expected" (Nov. 9, 2010, p. A22) is a case in point. The detailed article focuses on the effort to understand and address the school achievement gap for black males, yet the idea of discrimination is never raised. Readers are left to fill in their own explanation as to why young black boys do more poorly in school than their black sisters, more poorly than Latino boys, and worse than low-income whites.

Efforts to open up the conversation on problems of race will have to address or reverse this problematic imbalance — namely that in most media contexts, mentioning, much less insisting on, the role of discrimination is treated as a controversial or even racist stance, whereas failing to mention the

role of racial discrimination (even when it is clearly warranted) is considered a neutral or impartial stance. As Winant puts it, "a refusal to engage in 'race thinking' amounts to a defense of the racial status quo, in which systemic racial inequality and . . . discrimination . . . are omnipresent" (quoted by Warner, 2006). (Winant, 1997)

Implicit bias as a political tool

Further interfering with an open and constructive conversation about race is the way in which race has been used by politicians. Discourse about "welfare dependency" and the economic and social burdens of "handouts" have become a code for stoking and taking advantage of racial tensions in ways that help certain politicians and certain political projects (*e.g.*, anti-tax, small government rhetoric).

> When Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan swept California in the 1966 gubernatorial election, he sounded not only the familiar antitax, anti–social spending, antibureaucratic themes but at the same time baited "welfare mothers." He brought the house down when he asserted that welfare recipients are on a "prepaid lifetime vacation plan." (A careful survey experiment shows that voters hear these as code words for black welfare poor.) (Gilens, 1996)

It is clear that the public image of African Americans has suffered immensely by serving as a political football in the struggle between conservatives and progressives as they have sought to define some of the fundamental questions of the country — the distribution of wealth, the role of social policy and of government itself, the strength and direction of public institutions, and so on.

On this point, it is worth quoting at length from Sanford Schram's 2003 work, *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*:

> With the "old-fashioned" brand of racism now largely discredited, we inhabit a discursive moment defined by a mixture of corrosive racial resentments, fears of being labeled "racist," and uncertainties about whether it is wise to speak of race at all. Too often, race now operates by stealth, embedded in ostensibly neutral language. (Williams, 1997; Ansell, 1997) Many conversations take on a "we all know what we're talking about" feel, trading on race-coded euphemisms regarding "urban" and "inner city" problems, "cultural backgrounds," the need for "personal responsibility," the troubles of the "underclass," and so on. As George Orwell noted many years ago (1954), such euphemistic language nourishes political ideas that cannot bear the cold light of direct analysis; it protects the existing social order at the expense of clear thought and open deliberation.

The limits of communication — contact theory

Finally, the social science literature suggests strongly that communications efforts, while important, must always be considered alongside other more direct, experiential strategies. In particular, it is critical to continue finding creative ways of promoting direct contact (of a positive kind) between black males and others in American society.

Numerous scholars have adopted or tested aspects of "contact theory" — the hypothesis that interpersonal contact is an important causal factor for reducing prejudice of all kinds. (See one of the most seminal works in the field: Gordon Allport's study *The Nature of Prejudice,* 1954.) A carefully researched and highly cited 2006 review of over 500 studies found that contact theory is overwhelmingly supported by the data, and that contact typically reduces prejudice towards whole groups, even including groups not included in the study.

> Not only do attitudes toward the immediate participants usually become more favorable, but so do attitudes toward the entire outgroup, outgroup members in other situations, and even outgroups not involved in the contact. (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, p. 766)

The studies involved groups of all kinds — defined by race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, and other characteristics — and found similar patterns across all types of prejudice, as measured in a variety of different ways, from survey self-reports to experimental tests of implicit attitudes.

It is true that certain factors can significantly reduce the positive effects of contact:

> Institutional support for contact under conditions of competition or unequal status can often enhance animosity between groups, thereby diminishing the potential for achieving positive outcomes. (*Ibid.*, p. 766)

But these are far and away the exceptions to the rule. Overall, researchers believe the studies indicate "that the process underlying contact's ability to reduce prejudice involves the tendency for familiarity to breed liking," and also point out that the effects can last:

> To date, findings from longitudinal studies typically have shown the persistence of the prejudice reduction achieved by contact. (*Ibid.*, p. 768)

In short, advocates for better outcomes for black males almost certainly need to focus some of their efforts on promoting increased contact between black males and others. Certain types of contact are ideal — *e.g.*, individuals of equal status working together to achieve common goals — but the literature establishes that a very wide range of types of experiences will almost certainly help reduce bias and improve outcomes.

Looking Forward

The studies reviewed for this report paint a picture of a world in which black male lives and experience are distorted in public communications, in ways that lead to distorted understandings and attitudes towards them, and ultimately to serious obstacles to success and happiness in the real world. These patterns are critical for communicators to understand so that they know what they are up against.

Overall, the studies do not offer a great deal of specific guidance concerning exactly how to go about changing these patterns. They focus more on problems than solutions, and are more descriptive than prescriptive. It is clear that much more scholarship is needed on the ways in which communication can demonstrably help improve the situation for black males.

Nevertheless, taken along with the authors' own research experience on a wide range of social issues, the studies considered here do suggest a number of ideas that communicators should keep in mind about how to proceed.

The most obvious is that communicators need to continue to work to create a fuller and more accurate portrayal of black males in the media — through education and external pressure targeted at media producers — as well as by working to embed more African Americans in all links in the media production chain, and by producing their own media reflecting best practices.

In principle, the latter effort is likely to help with all the factors that lead to distorted portrayals, as African-American media owners, producers, writers, and so forth are less likely to fall into patterns of neglect and distortion. But we caution that simply having more African Americans involved in content production is not likely to be a silver bullet solution, for reasons discussed in the section on deep challenges and dilemmas. For instance, while a black news producer might be better prepared to address neglect of certain topics, he or she may have no clear idea about the best narratives or language for making systemic forces more visible, or about how to avoid various "blame the victim" dynamics.

Beyond working towards more representative and "relatable" portrayals of black males, communicators must face challenges regarding what to *say* about the topic, in order to take the best advantage of communications opportunities ranging from web pages, to speeches, interviews, and community conversations.

Some evidence, such as Iyengar's studies of the impact of thematic news stories, suggests that awareness of systematic patterns of bias against black males can have good results. For another example, see Losen's (2009) discussion of how the publication of significant high school graduation rate disparities between black males and others helped push national education policy in a constructive direction:

> While internationally the denial of education to women is of primary concern, in the USA, black males are often the sub-group experiencing the greatest harm. …
>
> [But a report on high school graduation rate disparities] attracted national attention … . As public awareness grew … many other researchers began studying and reporting similar findings. Several politicians, including Obama, added improving graduation rates to their election campaign's educational platform. Before election year in 2008, the Department of Education issued new regulations … [that] added accountability for schools and districts if minority or ethnic groups, students with disabilities, English learners or socio-economically disadvantaged youth failed to make adequate improvements in their rate of graduation. (Losen, 2009, p. 67)

But it is clear that, beyond simply reporting on the facts, communicators must work to find more effective ways of conveying some very difficult points — *e.g.*, while structural racism is a familiar idea to insiders, there are reasons to believe that conveying a clear picture of it to broader audiences remains an important challenge. For a range of cognitive and cultural reasons, the focus easily remains on individual choices. Conveying the idea of "invisible" systemic forces that stack the odds against black males is a challenge that cannot be overestimated.

Yet finding ways to offer audiences new mental pictures of the causality related to black male achievement is critically important, not just as a way of reassigning "blame," but also as a way of transcending some of the most challenging dilemmas communicators face. For instance, a new causal picture can help communicators get past the troublesome question of whether to avoid discussion of black men's choices, thereby inviting charges of idealizing them or setting the bar too low, or to invite charges of blaming the victim. A new understanding of big-picture causality could potentially put a more constructive light on seemingly self-destructive choices made by black males, *e.g.*, the choice to join gangs because they seem to offer opportunities for social and economic advancement otherwise lacking in some communities. Making this big-picture case is far from easy, as communicators already know, but it may be essential.

Note that one promising candidate for a focus of discussion may be implicit bias itself — as identified in psychology experiments. As a focus of communications, these points illustrate several criteria that our own research suggests can be important for effective communication on a fraught topic: (A) steering clear of the type of moral censure that can alienate many audience members; (B) pointing to "objective" facts that are harder to dispute; (C) conveying a relatively novel and unfamiliar point (rather than rehashing familiar claims and accusations); and (D) offering the hope that there are concrete steps that can help. (For various reasons discussed in the social science literature, including the so-called "just-world" orientation, Americans tend to respond more favorably to messages that offer hope — see, for example, Feinberg & Willer, 2010.)

More generally, in fact, communicators can be confident that promoting stories about solutions and success stories — interventions or causal factors of any kind that have altered black male outcomes for the better — will help engage new audiences. Whether in fiction shows, news accounts, press releases, or informal anecdotes, communicators are sure to gain new kinds of attention by offering audiences fresh and hopeful takes on the topic.

Another potentially promising direction may be pointing out (and calling out) the manipulative uses of race in the media and public discourse. Some of the social science evidence suggests that explicit inoculation against manipulators and manipulative messages can be very effective, and the strategy of opening people's eyes to how they are being duped has been effective in other issues areas, such as cigarettes and smoking.

Finally, communicators should keep in mind that any of their efforts that can help promote greater contact between African-American males and others may be among the most effective steps they can take.

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