

**Racial Identity, media use, and the social construction of risk**

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## Introduction

Despite the conflict and turmoil we have observed among media scholars with regard to discovering the nature of media effects and the most productive ways to assess them, there are very few among us who would deny that media help to shape the ways in which we understand the world (Hagen & Wasko, 2000; Livingstone, 1998). Our uncertainty regarding the role that media play in this process, however, exists in large part because we have become less parochial in our vision. Over the years we have come to expand the number and variety of individual and contextual factors that we believe are involved in shaping, or moderating the ways in which media content comes to be processed, stored, and used in our daily lives (Renckstorf, 1996). Among those individual factors that can also be linked to larger social, economic, and cultural influences are those influences we associate with our identities as members of groups. Our identity as a member of a group that is defined primarily by race or ethnicity is just one aspect of a complex identity structure (Frable, 1997; Jaret & Reitzes, 1999). We recognize further that the salience of our racial identities may vary across individuals, groups, contexts, and moments in time (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998). This paper examines the role that racial identity plays in moderating the influence of media on perceptions of the social environment.

## Background

Not all theories of media effects are concerned specifically with exposure to particular sorts of content. Some emphasize the importance of media forms and the context of consumption. Others emphasize the relationships between individuals and other sources of information that may happen to include mass media (Ball-Rokeach, 1998). These are concerns about media influence at a high level of generality. If we are concerned about the cultivation of particular social impressions, however, it seems to be important for us to consider the nature of the content to which we are exposed, whether that exposure is direct, or mediated through others (Anderson, 1996).

Outside the context of a laboratory experiment, exposure to content usually involves some degree of individual choice. And although choice is always constrained by a host of factors, we assume that audiences tend to select content they prefer over that which they find distasteful. Indeed, differences in tastes and preferences are not only what sets us apart from others, but they are also what enables media producers to segment us into groups (Gandy, in press). Evidence that African Americans prefer different television programs from those that Whites enjoy has begun to accumulate at the same time that the multi-channel media environment has expanded the number of available options (Schement, 1998).

However, identifying differences in media preferences by race or ethnicity tells us very little about the influence that group membership may have on the choices which are actually made. We would assume that variation in exposure within a racial group would be explained in part by differences in racial identity. In part, these differences would reflect that part of racial identity that is based on liking, affiliation, and appreciation of one's people and culture. Television content can even be assumed to provide a form of para-social interaction, which suggests that people who are favorably oriented toward people of their own race would tend to prefer content that enables such interaction, even if it is indirect.

Of course, not all portrayals of Black people and African American culture are favorable. In a media environment in which the primary audience is not expected to be Black, portrayals of Black characters need not be sympathetic. Indeed, the history of minorities in media suggest that the use of negative stereotypes tends to dominate the portrayal of those groups during the early stages of their representation (Gandy, 1998; Wilson and Gutierrez, 1995). We note, somewhat ironically, however, that African Americans and other minorities have been vocal critics of their representation in the mass media at the same time have been among the most active users of the medium (Allen & Bielby, 1979). We might assume that the nature and intensity of a person's criticism of the media would also vary with nature and intensity of an individual's identification with their racial group.

Davis and Gandy (1999) explored the relationship between racial identity and media criticism. They observed that African Americans who expressed a greater sense of sharing a "linked fate" with other Black people were more likely to agree that the mass media tend to present African American males as violent and threatening. What remains unclear is the role that a critical stance toward the media plays in moderating the impact of media exposure. In order to pursue this concern, we first need a better understanding of racial identity.

### ***Racial Identity***

There are a number of competing models of racial identity (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; )Hecht, et al., 1993). Many scholars suggest that racial identity is multidimensional (Resnicow & Ross-Gaddy, 1997). Its operational definition and measurement is group specific, and is marked by almost hopeless complexity when racial and ethnic identities are merged, for example among Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics (Light & Lee, 1997). For African Americans in particular, there are distinctions between aspects of identity that involve orientations toward one's own group and those aspects of identity that involve orientations toward Whites as a particular "other." These distinctions are important in defining different levels or stages in the development of a racial identity that individuals are thought to pass through as they mature(Cross, 1995).

Racial identity may also be understood as a situational variable. Not only do people differ in the nature of their racial identity as a function of their developmental histories (Thompson Sanders, 1999), but the

salience of racial identity as an aspect of a person's self-concept varies as a function of the situational cues that are present in a particular context, interaction, or relationship (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998).

In one study, Jaret and Reitzes (1997) asked survey respondents to indicate the importance of their different identities (race, class, occupation, marital, age, and gender) in four different settings (work, public places, one's neighborhood, and at home). After confirming previous suggestions that racial identity was more important for Blacks than for Whites, they observed that these differences were maintained across all four social settings. As we might expect, the differences in the salience of racial identity that we see between Black and White respondents is greatest at work, where both racial diversity and competition or conflict are likely to be the greatest. While African Americans tended to place gender identity above racial identity in importance, the difference between race and class was not significant.

We would expect that those aspects of our identity that are the most salient would help to determine which programs we decide to view, and once that decision is made, which aspects of a program we would pay the most attention to. In the same way that interest and motivation influences the way in which we process information (Ball-Rokeach, 1998; Renckstorf, 1996), we would expect that racial identity would determine which aspects of a program would be processed automatically, and which might trigger a critical response. The distinctions between dominant and oppositional readings that have concerned many of the media scholars influenced by Stuart Hall seems especially likely to be associated with reactions to content governed by one's racial identity (Stabile, 1995).

Unfortunately, some of the problems we face in understanding the role that racial identity plays in realm of media effects are related to the difficulty we face in separating the cues to racial identity that may be present in our inquiries, and the cues that may be present within the content to which our respondents are exposed. A response bias may be introduced whenever the questions we ask cue the respondent to the racial character of our inquiry. Racial affiliation, rather than a more general social desirability, may come to characterize the response of those persons for whom racial identity is highly salient. Despite these and related difficulties in demonstrating the influence of media exposure, we continue to believe that there is value in pursuing these issues from within the framework of cultivation (Gerbner, 1998; Mares, 1996; Tapper, 1995).

### ***Cultivation and Risk Perception***

We recognize that in its origins, the Cultivation Hypothesis was based on a set of assumptions about the contribution that television content made to our perception of the world as a mean and dangerous place (Gerbner, 1998). The "Mean World Hypothesis" and its associated "mean world syndrome" were concerned with the extent to which people mistrusted those around them. According to the hypothesis, the more time one spends in the "world of television" the more one comes to see the world in television terms as a mean and dangerous place. Gerbner suggested that there were no real world statistics about the extent

to which people can be trusted, and therefore it was not possible to estimate how far the television answer was from the objective facts. Still, Gerber and other scholars like Robert Putnam (1995) associated television viewing with an elevated sense of mistrust.

The Cultural Indicators team also computed something they referred to as a risk ratio, which provided some basis for assessing the nature of disparities in representation. Content analysis of prime time television provided the basis for describing the world of television in terms of what kinds of people tend to be violent and what kinds of people tend to be the victims of that violence. Risk ratios reported in 1979 indicated that non-White females were worse off than White females in terms of victimization (Gerbner, et al., 1979, p. 187).

Although the cultivation hypothesis associated concern about dangers in the environment with a high level of exposure to television, some critics have suggested alternative explanations. Mallory Wober (1986) suggested that a third factor, a personality construct developed by J.R. Rotter, could explain both heavy viewing and a sense of mistrust. Rotter's "Locus of Control" measure differentiated between those who felt that they were in control of their own destiny (internals), and those who felt that forces beyond their control determined their fates (externals). Wober demonstrated that (at least for respondents in the UK) when the influence of personality was controlled statistically, the influence of television exposure was reduced to non-significance. Wober argued that those who felt subject to forces beyond their control were likely to seek shelter from these risks by staying home and watching television.

Perhaps in the same way that a personality measure like Rotter's Locus of Control may help to explain both exposure to media and estimates of the distribution of risk in the environment, measures of racial identity may also influence media use and estimates of the nature of risks distributed by race.

Unfortunately, only a very small number of studies have examined the ways in which the media, primarily the news media, have emphasized race in their discussion of hazards and risk. Singer and Endreny (1993) characterize press coverage of the risks faced by lower status groups as one of neglect. They do note, however, that among those stories that are concerned with race and risk, many are racially comparative. That is, they suggest that African Americans are at greater risk than other groups. The presentation of racially comparative risk has been a central concern of a number of studies reported by Gandy and his colleagues (Gandy, 1996; Gandy, et al., 1997; Goshorn & Gandy, 1995). These studies suggest that the overwhelming majority of racially comparative frames emphasize the victimization of African Americans, rather than more favorable outcomes for Whites or other groups.

It is clear from the research on risk perception that media representations form only part of the field upon which individual assessments are built. While the mass media play a significant role in our estimations of

risk (Singer and Endreny, 1993), differences in the perception of risk in the environment also reflect a more general sense of powerlessness that is shared by women and African Americans (Flynn, Slovic & Mertz, 1994).

There are additional problems involved in assessing the impact of media on perceptions of differential exposure to hazards in the environment. One can ask people to estimate their own level of risk. They could be classified by race, and then we might compare the differences across these categories. Another set of estimates would be produced by asking people to estimate the risks faced by different categories or groups of people. It seems likely that our estimates of the risks faced by others would be influenced more by media exposure than would our estimates of our own risk. However, estimates of our own vulnerability may be also be affected by our exposure to media representations of the experiences of people like us. This assumption is at the heart of the cultivation hypothesis.

There are additional methodological complications that affect our analysis of comparative risk. The magnitude of our estimates seem to vary with the ways in which the comparisons are framed. It seems that respondents tend to focus on the features of the subject of a comparison and use them in their assessment of the referent. As a result, they tend to ignore other, potentially relevant features of the referent. Thus, for example, when we are asked to compare two games in terms of their level of excitement, it matters whether tennis or soccer is used as the subject of the comparison. Even when we compare ourselves with others in terms of who is more or less lucky, it matters whether we, or other people are presented as the subject of the comparison.

Some 59 percent of respondents in one experiment said that they were more lucky when they were asked to compare themselves to others. Only 29 percent said they were more lucky when they were asked to compare others to themselves (Wänke et al., 1995). The impact of the framing of comparisons may be especially problematic when race is involved because of the extent to which conceptions of different subjects may be based on stereotypes as well as racial animosity (Judd & Park, 1993; Lee, Jussim & McCauley, 1995).

Gandy and Baron's (1998) examination of racial differences in the perception of inequality between the races can be understood as a study of comparative risk assessment. One explicitly comparative measure in their study asked respondents whether African Americans were better off or worse off than the average White person with regard to income, housing, health care, education, and the risk of job loss. Estimates of this index of relative risk (Blackgap) were significantly higher for Blacks than for Whites. They observed a significant influence of media attention consistent with the cultivation hypothesis in that the estimates of Black vulnerability were significantly higher for both Whites and African Americans who regularly attended to news about race relations.

## Research Design

In the context of the concerns expressed about the nature of racial identity, this paper reports an attempt to examine the influence of racial identity as a mediator of the influence of the media on our understanding of the nature of violence against women. It seeks to understand the extent to which racial identity influences an individual's perception of the risks of domestic violence faced by Black and White women. Because the literature suggests that racial identity functions differently for African Americans than for Whites, a more fruitful examination would hold the influence of race constant. This can be accomplished in part by studying one group at a time.

Measures of racial identity that have been discussed in terms of "linked fate" have been shown to have considerable power as predictors of political preference (Dawson, 1994). It seems appropriate, therefore that this sort of measure would be used in a study of risk perception that might inform public policy. The primary distinction between available measures of linked fate is in the extent to which the concern about risk or fate is individual rather than collective.

It also seems clear from the literature that the influence of the press varies with the importance of the topic or issue being discussed. The selection of a familiar issue increases the possibility that all respondents will have at least given it some thought. There is, however some risk that highly salient topics may produce strong agreement rather than differences of opinion within the population.

It was also assumed that racial identity was more likely to have an influence on the processing of information about topics that were explicitly about matters of race. Thus, in order to examine the ways in which racial identity served to modify the influence of media exposure with regard to highly salient issues involving racial comparisons, this study examines the influence of media on perceptions of domestic violence.

Because of the historical association of cultivation analysis with studies of violence, it seems reasonable to extend the traditional analysis into the realm of domestic violence. Early reports from the Cultural Indicators (CI) project emphasized the victimization of women (Gerbner et al., 1979). Differences in victimization by race were also discussed, but the researchers did not assess the extent to which these differences were distortions of the true, or empirical reality of women, or whether these differences were reflected in the perceptions of heavy viewers.

Traditional studies of the "mean world" common to Cultivation Analysis asks people to evaluate their own risk, or to estimate the level of risk in the environment. This study sought to evaluate the influence of media on respondent's estimates of the risks faced by members of different races. We sought to understand how

African Americans would differ in their estimation of the risk of violence that Black and White women faced at the hands of their mates.

Estimates of the actual distribution of domestic violence among racial and ethnic groups are unreliable because official statistics reflect class and cultural differences in women's willingness to report this abuse to the police. Homicide records may be somewhat more reliable than either surveys or records of complaints. Of course, "intimate partner homicide" represents only the most extreme level of domestic violence against women. Carol Puzone and her colleagues (2000) have examined FBI statistics in order to assess trends in partner homicides by race between 1976 and 1995. They note that of all adult women murdered during this period, 34 percent were killed by an intimate partner. The data suggest that overall, the rates of homicide have been declining more rapidly for Black intimate partners than for White intimate partners. The increase in victimization for White females at the hands of their boyfriends increased rather dramatically in recent years. However, despite these trends, official statistics suggest that "Blacks are still at greater risk than Whites of being killed by intimate partners" (Puzone et al., 2000, p. 419).

The Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, in cooperation with the Family Violence Prevention Fund, developed a radio campaign that was designed to reduce the amount of domestic violence among African Americans (Hornik, et al, 2000). The project was designed as a multi-city intervention with pre- and post-test measures of attitudes and behaviors related to domestic violence. Information about media use, attitudes and experience with domestic violence, and exposure to the campaign materials were gathered over the telephone by professional interviewers.

The telephone interviews were conducted in five waves, three before, one during, and one after the campaign was concluded. Screening questions were designed to exclude those respondents who were not African American, and those who were unlikely to be exposed to the campaign because they did not regularly listen to the Black-formatted stations that were identified in each of the four cities. It is important to note that the original evaluation design was not fully implemented. The programs were only broadcast on a 12 week schedule in a single market, and only responses from that market were gathered in the fifth wave. Over the five waves of the campaign, 3181 African Americans completed a telephone interview.

Each respondent was asked to indicate whether they believed that "Black women are more likely, less likely, or as likely as White women to be physically abused by their husbands or boyfriends." Nearly 3% of the respondents declined to choose any of the options provided, leaving 3090 respondents available for the analyses that follow.

There were several detailed questions about media use included in the survey. Because the campaign involved radio drama, several questions explored the extent of radio listening among the respondents. In

addition, they were asked to indicate how many days each week they usually read a newspaper and how many hours per day they usually watched television. In addition, they were asked how many television programs they usually watched each week that have a mostly African American cast, and whether they usually read any newspapers meant for the African American community. These questions provided an unusual level of detail about the nature of the respondents' exposure to general and targeted media content. However, there was a high level of non-response to questions about reading papers meant for African American readers (14.4%), and a moderate level of non-response to questions about viewing television programs with a mostly African American cast (7.3%).

Two questions were included that were designed to measure racial identity directly. Both were adapted from the earlier study by Davis and Gandy (1999). The first, which is considered to capture linked fate from an individual perspective asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement that "What happens to black people generally will affect what happens in my life." The second, which is designed to capture linked fate from a community, or social perspective asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement that "I can make real progress only when the Black community as a whole makes progress." A third question, which captures a derived indication of racial identity is also adapted from the earlier study by Davis and Gandy. It asks respondents to indicate their agreement or disagreement with this statement: "The mass media tend to present Black men as violent and threatening."

In addition to standard demographic measures, respondents were also asked to indicate whether or not they grew "up in a home in which your mother was ever abused by her husband or boyfriend."

## Findings

An analysis of distributions suggests that the dependent variable is less than ideal. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they felt that White and Black women were equally at risk. Nevertheless, nearly 20 percent of the respondents indicated that they felt that Black women were more likely to be victims, while 15.1 percent indicated that they felt that White women were more likely to be victims.

The measures of racial identity tended to be bimodal, with less than three percent of the respondents expressing neutrality on either measure. There were, however, some notable differences in the distribution of responses to these measures. The more self-interested measure had nearly 32 percent who agreed strongly, while the more collectivist response attracted somewhat less than 24 percent who agreed strongly.

Education emerged as a significant predictor of respondents' estimates of risk. Differences observed in an analysis of variance based on five levels of education were highly significant ( $F=10.29$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Those

respondents with more education tended to think that White women were at greater risk than Black women ( $R = .094$ ). When we examine the correlation between education and living in a household in which their mother was abused, we find that education is also a significant factor ( $\tau = .049$ ,  $p = .003$ ). Those with more education are less likely to report that their mothers had been abused. Not surprisingly, Black respondents who grew up in households in which their mothers had been physically abused were more likely to say that Black women were at greater risk ( $F = 24.69$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

The respondents to the surveys came from four different cities. Forty-one percent of the respondents came from the city in which the anti-violence radio campaign ran for 12 weeks. Each of the other three cities provided approximately 19 percent of the respondents. An analysis of variance revealed that people in the city in which the campaign was broadcast were more likely to say that Black women were at greater risk ( $F = 5.07$ ,  $p = .024$ ).

### ***Media use and perceptions of racially comparative risk***

Approximately 24 percent of the respondents reported watching two or fewer hours of television each day. Another 24 percent reported watching six or more hours each day. Of those responding to the question, approximately 30 percent indicated that they watched five or more programs with a mostly African American cast.

Nearly 43 percent reported reading a daily newspaper 5 or more days a week, while nearly 26 percent said they read the paper less than two days a week. Approximately 41 percent of those responding indicated that they usually read newspapers meant for the African American community each week.

There was very little variation in the respondents' assessment of media performance with regard to the portrayal of the African American male. More than 62 percent agreed strongly that the media tended to present Black men as violent and threatening. However, the more respondents viewed television, the less critical they tended to be ( $r = .06$ ). There was no significant relationship between being critical of media and watching programs with African American casts. We observe a somewhat different relationship among newspaper readers. Those who read newspapers more were more critical of the media's portrayal of African Americans ( $r = -.06$ ).

However, as in the Davis & Gandy (1999) study, there was a tendency for those with higher levels of racial identification to be more critical of the media. The relationship with the more individual measure ( $r = .22$ ) was twice as strong as it was with the more collective measure ( $r = .10$ ).

Risk perceptions appeared to vary somewhat with newspaper reading ( $F = 1.92$ ,  $p = .063$ ) but the relationship was neither linear, nor substantial ( $R = -.014$ ). However, those respondents who usually read

newspapers meant for African Americans were more likely than those who did not to believe Black women were at greater risk ( $F = 6.64, p = .010$ ).

Television viewing was only slightly more important than newspaper reading as a predictor of perceived risk ( $F = 2.12, p = .025$ ). Those who watched more television tended to think that Black women were at greater risk ( $R = -.047$ ). Knowing how often people viewed television programs with a predominantly Black cast provided no useful information ( $F = .557, p = .813$ ). Because there was so little variance in the respondents' assessment of the media's portrayals of African males, it was not surprising that this measure was of little use as a predictor of risk perceptions ( $F = .917, p = .453$ ).

### ***Racial identity and perceptions of racially comparative risk***

Because they are based on an underlying concept of common fate, we would expect that these two measures would be positively correlated. The correlation is significant, but only moderately so, indicating that they reflect distinct dimensions of racial identity ( $R = .35, p = .000$ ). Both measures of racial identity were associated with perceptions of greater risk for Black women.

The individualistic measure suggested that the more you felt your individual fate was tied to the well being of other Black people, the more likely you were to think that Black women were at greater risk than White women ( $R = .058$ ). The community oriented measure pointed in the same direction, but the relationship was slightly stronger ( $R = .079$ ).

### ***The multivariate assessment***

Hierarchical multiple regression was used in attempt to assess the independent contribution of gender, racial identity, education, experience, and media use as factors that might influence an individual's perception of risk.

The media exposure variables were entered in the first step. Of the two, only television viewing was a significant predictor of risk assessment ( $Beta = -.049, p = .008$ ). When measures of racial identity were introduced, the television measure remained significant, and was essentially unchanged. When measures of education, and gender were introduced in the next step, both were significant, but their entry had the effect of reducing the contribution of both television and newspaper use to non-significance. With the addition of a measure of personal experience (mother's abuse) in the next step, the influence of media was little changed. However, with the introduction of a dummy variable indicating whether the respondents lived in the city that had maximum campaign exposure, we observe a somewhat unexpected result. Newspaper reading achieves significance, although the Beta is still quite small (see Table 1).

## Discussion and Conclusions

On the basis of these data, we would have to conclude that we still have a long way to go toward understanding the influence of identity, and media use on social perceptions of differential risk.

The multivariate model explains less than 3 percent of the variance in the dependent variable. Clearly the model is under-specified. The introduction of racial identity measures has virtually no impact on the contribution made by the media use measures. Instead, both measures appear to make independent, but quite minimal contributions to the respondents' perceptions of risk. The fact that the contribution from the racial identity variables remains essentially unchanged when the personal experience measure is entered into the equation also supports the conclusion that racial identity is an independent influence on the perception of racially comparative risk.

At the bivariate level, education is the most important source of variation in the risk estimates. Although we cannot rely on homicide statistics as a reliable indicator of non-lethal violence, the risk ratios we calculate on the basis of the rates per 100,00 suggest that Black women are actually three times more likely to be killed by their boyfriends than White women. Yet, those with more education are less likely to say that Black women are at greater risk. The influence of education in moving estimates away from what may be the more accurate view can be understood in terms of the ways in which Black people learn about the risks that women face. We would have to assume that education, and the exposure to American literature that education provides, may be the source of examples of White, rather than Black victims of domestic violence.

We can think about the impact of education also in relation to other more direct sources of information about the risks to Black women. Being raised in a home in which one's mother was abused is associated with believing that Black women are at greater risk. However, respondents with more education tended not to have been raised in such homes. Yet, at every level of education except the highest, the respondents who came from homes in which domestic violence did take place tended to place Black women at higher risk.

In the absence of any content analysis that describes the nature and extent of television portrayals and news coverage of domestic violence, there is little basis for predicting precisely what the nature of the media's impact might have been. The correlation between media use and perceptions of risk is consistent with an assumption that media content reflects the social reality of risk implied by the homicide statistics. The fact that the television programs that feature African American casts tend to be situation comedies, rather than action adventure or police drama helps us to understand that exposure to these programs might be unrelated to perceptions of risk.

The fact that respondents in the campaign city were more likely to say that Black women were at greater risk than White women might be attributed to the campaign itself, although the evidence in support of such an impact is quite weak. The validated exposure to the campaign was extremely low (Hornik, et al., 2000). There are no significant differences in risk estimates across the measurement waves, and analysis of variance does not reveal any difference between the cities in terms of racial identity ( $F = 1.49$ ,  $p = .215$ ) which might have explained differences in the willingness of stations to present the campaign.

It is important to understand how media portrayals influence our understanding of risk in the environment. It is important to understand the distribution of risks in comparative terms because of the role that such comparisons play in our willingness to support public policies that might control the distribution of risk. It is our concern about public policy that underscores the need for us to pursue more closely the influence of ways in which we frame questions about comparative risk. The single measure used in this study was extremely limited.

It is also important to understand how racial identity may influence attention to and understanding of stories about risks, causes, and alternatives. Domestic violence is just one of the many risks we might explore. This study suggests that the mass media, at least as we have measured exposure in this study, is not as important as other sources of information about the risks women face. We should examine those other sources as well.

Table 1  
Estimation of Black Women's Risk of Physical Abuse  
Final Model

Variable	Beta	p
TV hours	-.032	.081
Newspaper reading	-.038	.043
Mother abused	.084	.000
Education level	.091	.000
Gender	.033	.073
Racial ID {individual}	.046	.018
Racial ID {community}	.058	.002
Campaign exposure	.048	.009
Adjusted R Square	.026	
F	10.916	.000

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