Hollywood's Social Construction of Innocence: Entertainment Media's Deviant Portrayal of Black Children

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Abstract

The analysis is a sociohistorical examination of entertainment media's representation of black children from the 1970s to 2000s. Each decade of media production provides insight into the presentation of black children in regards to the stereotypes and biased messages conveyed. The analysis delineates the narrowly defined yet deviant manner in which black children have been depicted. Examples derived from motion picture films and television shows are set forth to illustrate the manner in which black children have traditionally been included, or perhaps excluded, in the perpetuation of racial stereotypes reflective of the coinciding stereotypes usually projected on to black adults.

Keywords Black youth · Adulthood · Media · Rhetoric · Inequality · Deviance

Introduction

With particular emphasis on black males, myriad analyses have examined the role of the media imagery of blacks on the perceptions of whites and other members of society (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Moscaro, 2004; Baynes, 2003; Eschholz et al., 2002; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Rada, 2000; Chermak, 1998). In doing so, studies have also examined the influence of stereotypical media images on black males' collective and individual experiences with members of law enforcement (Hurwitz & Peffley 2005; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004; Mastro & Robinson 2000). The stereotypical media images of black women as mammies, jezebels, and sapphire have also been examined at great length. Analyses have also probed the role of images of black women, and low-income black women especially, as they relate to the development of foster care policies enacted or adopted by federal and state law-making bodies (Krestsdemas,

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2010; Clawson, 2002; Gilens, 1996). In contrast, there is limited literature on the manner in which the media has depicted, and continues to depict, black children. While some have speculated that negative images of blacks have adverse effects on the psychological and social development of black children limited, if any, analyses have examined the roles of black children in the media and the impact of those images on public perception (Martin, 2008; Ward, 2004). Hence, there are limited analyses that address or discuss the potential impact media depictions have on the lived experiences of black children.

Such analyses are increasingly necessary considering revelations and events in recent years. Among those events include reports of disparate school-based punishment administered to black youth relative to their white counterparts. Additionally, news media reports have shed light on the adverse interactions often had between law enforcement personnel and black children and teenagers. Likewise, the proliferation of cell phone technology and usage in conjunction with the ubiquity of social media has forced many to witness the disparate, and even contentious, manner in which various members of society treat black children and adolescents.

The following is a sociohistorical analysis of film and television media's representation of black children from the 1970s to 2000s. Each decade of media production provides insight into the presentation of black children in regards to the stereotypes and biased messages conveyed. The analysis delineates the narrowly defined yet deviant ways in which black children have been depicted. Throughout the analysis, examples derived from movies and television shows are set forth to illustrate the manner in which black children have traditionally been included, or perhaps excluded, in the perpetuation of tropes and racial stereotypes reflective of the coinciding stereotypes usually projected on to black adults.

Analyses of Black Youth in Media To Date

As previously noted, the existing literature on black children and the media is limited in scope. Chaney and Robertson (2013) conducted a qualitative analysis of news media reports and determined that the manner in which murders of white children were discussed by media outlets used explicit wording such as “innocent” or “angels” while the murders of black children were framed in contrast. Other, existing literature pertaining to the relationship between black children and the media centers on the impact television commercials have on the nutritional habits of black children (Harrison, 2006; Institute of Medicine, 2006).

In fictional contexts, existing literature examines the presence of children of color versus white children in television commercials (Larson, 2003; Peterson, 2002). In doing so, the existing literature delineates the types of roles played by African-American children in contrast to their white counterparts (Peterson, 2002). For example, Peterson (2002) found that African-American children

were less likely to be cast in scholarly roles at the same rate as white children. Seiter (1990) also noted that African-American children received less talking time in commercials versus their white peers. In a follow-up study, Bang and Reece (2003) revealed that, in comparison to their white counterparts, black children are less likely to be depicted in home settings. The authors noted that the omission of black children from home settings may subtly indicate a lack of family ties. Although the existing literature, to a limited extent, looks at the framing of black children in fictional contexts, it does not look at the depiction of black children in long terms or full-length cinematic features that reach, or have reached, large audiences. Furthermore, the existing literature fails to examine the impacts of such imaging on the perceptions of black children by the larger society.

Media as a Negotiation or Representation of Reality

For many, the media serves as a proxy for and a reflection of real life (Eschholz et al., 2002; Gilliam et al., 2002; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). In many respects, the media is a tool of cultural production illustrating the prevailing norms and values of the larger society (Garfield et al., 2007; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Media products, programming, and content typically fluctuate in congruence with the events, expectations, and norms of society (Philo, 2008). As a brief example, the portrayal of select groups outside of their once stereotypical roles has facilitated society's acceptance of such persons in their newly acquired roles or statuses (Robertson, 2010). Consequently, as members of society access and negotiate the messages produced or introduced by the media, perceptions of events and associated populations are formed (Adoni & Mane, 1984; Happer & Philo, 2013). As such, in some respects, the media, either directly or indirectly, aides in the perceptions of people or issues. In other respects, one could contend that the media, in fact, defines or shapes the manner in which the larger society views groups, and thereby influences the interactions individuals have with one another (Happer & Philo, 2013).

For this reason, the media, in its various forms, has an unquestionable impact on viewing and listening audiences. One of the primary impacts the media is likely to have is the perpetuation of collective meanings (Liberato & Foster, 2011; Kivel & Johnson, 2009). As the media are capable of influencing how mass numbers of people perceive and think about specific groups, issues, and events, the media can, and has, expertly manipulated how we respond to illustrations and visual representations ultimately controlling the meanings society attaches to symbols and images (Adoni & Mane, 1984; Hill-Collins, 2000). Notably, the color black has historically been associated with negative images or meanings. A commonly viewed image is the use of the color black to identify the villain while the color white is utilized to indicate or imply the protagonist or hero of a story. These images have been historically introduced

in childhood via such cartoon images as the wicked witch in black and the innocent damsel in white. The images continue into adulthood with the use of black actors to play in roles involving criminality or moral compromise while whites typically play roles of heroism or moral superiority (Hughey, 2010; Martin, 2008).

Historical Underpinnings and Slavery Depictions

The brutal and dehumanizing practices of slavery did not spare children. Like adults, children of slaves were also forced to labor long hours and under harsh conditions. Even worse, it was not uncommon for children to be separated from their mothers and sold off to another slave owner for the purposes of plantation labor (Guttman, 1976; Roberts, 2017). In fact, the reproductive labor of enslaved black women was often exploited for the economic benefit of slave owners (Roberts, 2017; Rousseau, 2009). Simply stated, the more children bore by enslaved black women, the more laborers to support the slave-based economy (Millward, 2010; Roberts, 2017). Consequently, black children were essentially born to serve as walking, talking commodities necessary for the continued existence of the slave-based economy. Due to the labor expectations imposed on black children, the institution of slavery laid the foundation for imposing adult expectations on to black children.

Films documenting, or grounded in, historical events have regularly depicted the conditions in which enslaved black children lived and grew. Such films continue to underscore the origins of many black children within the social structure (e.g., *12 Years a Slave*, *Birth of a Nation*, *Roots*. etc.). Contemporary slavery-centered films such as *12 Years a Slave*, for example, presented children playing in a carefree manner near the main character as he was tied to a tree by his neck. In this scene particularly, a message that enslaved children were desensitized to acts of violence was conveyed—a symbolic reiteration of the notion that children of color are natives to violence (Parham-Payne, 2014).

Disproportionate Depiction of Black Children in Inner City

From the 1920s to the 1940s, the television show *Our Gang* shared the adventures of the mischievous Little Rascals as they engaged in childhood activities. In later years, the show received criticism for its oft perceived stereotypical depiction of children of color on the show. One of the more notable examples would be that of the character Buckwheat, a member of The Little Rascals, whose hair was often styled to reflect that of the stereotypical pickaninny. Additionally, he often wore clothing and shoes that were oversized and tattered. Following the end of *Our Gang*, to see a black child on television or in the movies was rare.

Although black adults began to emerge on television shows during the late 1960s through the 1970s, it seems that black children were virtually absent. Aside

from movies centered on slavery, children of color, and black children in particular, overwhelmingly have and continue to be depicted as backdrops of the inner city riddled with crime and otherwise questionable behavior.

Depiction of Black Children in 1970s

The 1970s witnessed the emergence of blacks in cinema. Many of the films surrounded urban dwelling and contained plot lines related to criminal activity ranging from corruption to murder. This time period gave birth to the subgenre of films commonly referred to as Blaxploitation. The movies of this subgenre often placed emphasis on the criminal activity stereotypically associated with the urban ghetto (e.g., *Shaft*, *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown*, *Super Fly*, *Cleopatra*, etc.). As such, popular media productions of the 1970s often depicted black children and adolescents as products of poverty-driven dysfunction. A notable example, *Black Caesar*, illustrates the story of Tommy, a teenage boy, who aspires to a life of crime after a traumatic experience with a police officer. Keeping with the exposure to violence theme within the urban ghetto, in 1975, *Cornbread, Earl, and Me* focused on the lives of friends who witness one of their friends killed by the police.

In the 1974 *Claudine*, the experiences of a garbage collector dating a welfare-dependent black, single mother of six children in Harlem, New York, is depicted. The children are depicted as being ill-mannered and foul-mouthed. The movie served as a cinematic manifestation of the rhetoric surrounding low-income black families, particularly those in receipt of welfare. In her seminal work originally published in 1997, *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Robert's contended,

Contemporary welfare rhetoric blames single Black mothers for transmitting a deviant lifestyle to their children, a lifestyle marked not only by persistent welfare dependency but also by moral degeneracy... (2017:112)

Approximately a decade later, Rousseau made a similar contention. In *Black Woman's Burden*, Rousseau analyzed the role of social rhetoric in the crafting of policy related to reproductive rights, and pointedly, she contended,

A Black family dependent upon the welfare system is perceived as a dangerous scenario in which Black women's children are in danger of growing uncontrollable within the confines of society (2009: 51).

Accordingly, Rousseau also observed the promulgation of negative stereotypical images of black women in receipt of welfare beginning in the mid-1970s. More specifically, she explicitly wrote of the children, "Her children are portrayed as unkempt and poorly cared for, learning more from the harsh and unforgiving city streets than from his/her Black mother and absent father."

Television series including black children in the 1970s were similar. Beginning in 1974, the popular show *Good Times* depicted a low-income, black family living in project housing on the south side of Chicago. A popular series

of the time, copious number of viewers tuned in each week to watch the family, including their teenage children, as they habitually navigated street crime, substandard tenements, and food insecurity (Campbell, 2006). The children also witnessed their parents as they contended with chronic unemployment and underemployment. In doing so, the children were required to contend with issues mature in nature ultimately forcing them to appear more adult than adolescent. Several years later, in 1978, a show by the name of *Diff'rent Strokes* soon debuted. Unlike *Good Times*, the premise of the show was the experiences of two black children, Willis and Arnold, living in a luxury high-rise apartment following the untimely death of their mother and subsequent adoption by a wealthy white man who once employed their mother as his housekeeper. The children's removal from their home in the ghetto subtly implied that they were unique, and therefore not exposed to the similar experiences of children residing in low-income, urban communities. Instead, the characters of Willis and Arnold were depicted in a more nuanced manner including the typical development from childhood to adolescence (e.g., pets, puberty, test anxiety, first dates, etc.). Furthermore, the wealthy white man, Mr. Drummond, is used to fulfill the role of the white savior who saved the black children from the urban ghetto, and consequently, living like the others.

Depiction of Black Children in the 1980s

The 1980s witnessed the premiere of *The Cosby Show*, which featured a black, upper-middle class family raising five children who were navigating the ups and downs of their respective age levels. *The Cosby Show* was a novelty, as it was one of the few shows that included college-educated, black professionals raising a family in a middle to upper-middle income neighborhood (Martin, 2008). Still, while *The Cosby Show* was undoubtedly unprecedented, it was one of the few pieces of media production in the 1980s that showed black children having the usual experiences associated with growing up.

Moreover, *The Cosby Show* stood in demographic contrast to the pop culture movies of the 1980s. The 1980s produced some of the most iconic adolescent-themed, or coming of age, movies in Hollywood history including *The Breakfast Club*, *Pretty in Pink*, *Stand By Me*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Some Kind of Wonderful*, *Can't Buy Me Love*, *Sixteen Candles*, *Adventures in Babysitting*, *Risky Business*, etc. In general, the aforementioned movies and others like them depicted white, often working or middle class, children and teenagers trying to navigate the complexities of adolescence and impending adulthood. While the characters of such movies may engage in some misconduct and shenanigans, it is often depicted as light-hearted and benign behavior driven by a sense of natural teenage curiosity. Even the main characters of the movie *Weird Science*, who engage in underage drinking and firearm use, are showed simultaneously as playfully mischievous yet benevolently genius adolescents.

Yet, none of the aforementioned movies included adolescents of color in any of the main casts. Consequently, the omission further perpetuates a false

dichotomy of good, white teenager versus bad, black teenager, reinforcing members of society to view black teenagers as in need of greater discipline or punishment when mistakes or bad decisions are made (Arnett, 2018; Gonzalez Van Cleve, 2016). This omission further gives the impression that children and adolescents of color do not have the same experiences as white children and teenagers, thereby disassociating them with the common mishaps or growing pains associated with coming of age. Such images or cinematic productions deny empirical evidence demonstrating that white and minority adolescents, regardless of socioeconomic status, possess comparable levels of developmental characteristics including impulsiveness, thrill seeking, and vulnerability to peer pressure (Johnson et al., 2011; Steinburg, 2008). Accordingly, the exclusion of them from mainstream coming of age movies facilitated an illusion that children and teenagers of color are not complex human beings who also grapple with a range of emotions and experiences of a maturing individual.

Not to mention, the omission of adolescents of color from the aforementioned movies, and similar unidentified movies, betrayed the reality of the growing black middle class that took place following the passage of the Civil Rights Act (Schneider & Phelan, 1993; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2005).

Depiction of Black Children in the 1990s and 2000s

The 1990s saw an eruption of movies with predominantly black casts. Black children and teenagers went from virtual obscurity in the 1980s to notoriety in the 1990s—a time period marked by the crack epidemic that was frequently associated with communities of color. During and following the height of the crack epidemic, a proliferation of movies emerged that aided in the criminalization and marginalization of black adolescents and children (e.g., *Juice*, *South Central*, *Sugar Hill*, *Clockers*, *Fresh*, *New Jersey Drive*, *Above the Rim*, etc.). In addition, perpetuating the since disproven assertion of the “crack baby syndrome,” cinematic productions, such as the popular *Losing Isaiah*, made children residing in urban settings to appear innately deficient (Blow, 2010; Logan, 1999; Okie, 2009; Rousseau, 2009).

Starting off the 1990s, *New Jack City* was released to theaters in 1991. The movie, rife with violent scenes including children of color, centered on the character Nino Brown, a notorious drug dealer who dominates the streets of New York city. From beginning to end, black children are seen as being exposed to violence and illicit drug use. Indeed, in an opening scene, Nino Brown’s henchmen barge into random apartments in order to assault and accordingly intimidate tenants including children. At one very unsettling point later in the film, a black child is used as a shield from oncoming gunfire.

Two years later, a series of movies were released that focused on the experiences of persons residing in urban ghettos and contending with the crack epidemic. Three seminal movies of the mid to late 1990s, *Boyz ‘n Da Hood*, *Menace II Society*, and *Poetic Justice*, included plot lines, and hence characters attempting to overcome or navigate crime-ridden neighborhoods. In various scenes within

the three movies, black children and adolescents are shown immersed in seedy environments laden with behaviors fueled by drug addiction and desperation.

The pattern continued at the turn of the century. Shows such as *The Wire* regularly presented black children actively engaged in, or impacted by, the criminal activities typically associated with urban, low-income areas. The movies and television shows of the 2000s also carried on the images of the 1990s with productions such as *Precious* that centered on a teenage girl living in poverty with an emotionally unavailable, welfare dependent mother who mentally and sexually abuses her. Other movies including *Freedom Writers*, *American Gangster*, *Hustle and Flow*, *Baby Boy*, etc. perpetuated the hegemonic notion that the vast majority of black children resided in urban ghettos and were enmeshed in a ghettoized culture of immoral behavior including but not limited to crime, pathological drug usage, and voluntary unemployment. A 2007 episode of *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* illustrated this notion pointedly. Upon discovering a dead body in an apartment complex, two white police officers comment on the children's, all of whom are black, nonchalant reaction to the corpse. In response, a third officer commented, "...of course they kept playing. It's not their first corpse."

Hollywood and the Victim Archetype

The portrayal of black children as stoic products of dysfunctional inner-city environments obscures the perception of them as innocent (Burrell, 2010; Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Parham-Payne, 2014). Because of these portrayals, viewing black children as victims, or even vulnerable, is uncommon. Aside from science fiction movies, dramatic cinematic productions, in particular, often seek to reflect moderately to largely believable storylines or plots in order to evoke a sense of connectedness among the viewing audience. Therefore, dramatic film productions typically utilize persons that reflect widely perceived, even stereotypical roles held or occupied by members of various demographic groups. In doing so, entertainment media contributes to the creation of the subjective reality in which whites are more often than not the epitome of morality while persons of color are depicted as morally and ethically compromised. Explicitly, contrary to the portrayal of African-Americans as innately immoral, whites, and white males in particular, are often portrayed as the hero or a symbolic representation of morality causing many to perceive whites as the embodiment of decency and goodness (e.g., *Die Hard* series, *The Bourne* trilogy, *The Mission Impossible* series, *Shooter*, *Con Air*, *Air Force One*, *The International*, *The Sentinel*, *Colors*, *Blue Bloods*, *The Mentalist*, etc.) (Hughey, 2010). This common portrayal of whites as the collective representative of morality enables the widely received portrayal of whites as the virtual absolute opposite of depravity and degeneracy.

Therefore, accepting whites in the role of the victim has become pervasively acceptable as well. Empirical evidence suggests that white women, in particular, are often regarded as the representation of purity and innocence placing them in the need of protection (Friedan, 2013; Harris-Perry, 2011; Rousseau, 2009; Hooks, 2000). Accordingly, for many movies, the role of victim is often portrayed by a

white female (e.g., *Savages*, *Four Brothers*, *Knight and Day*, *State of Play*, *Sleeping with the Enemy*, *Excess Baggage*, *Fear*, *Murder at 1600*, *The Net*, *A Perfect Murder*, *No Way Out*, *Pelican Brief*, *The General's Daughter*, etc.). As a result, white females have become the ubiquitous and, hence, visually acceptable quintessence of the stereotypical adult victim (Sommers, 2016; Hooks, 2000).

By extension, as has been evidenced in a plethora of crime-related movies in which a child is central to the storyline, most child victims are often portrayed by those of the same racial demographic (e.g., *The Lovely Bones*, *Man On Fire*, *Flight Plan*, *Gone Baby Gone*, *Firewall*, *Hostage*, *Mercury Rising*, *Ransom*, *Just Cause*, *Freedomland*, *Changeling*, *Mystic River*, *True Crime*, etc.). The general citizenry has, in fact, become conditioned to expecting child victims to be portrayed by white child actors. As an example, a noticeable amount of fans of the *Hunger Games* stories used social media to express their inability to empathize with a child of color as a victim. Subsequent to the premiere of the long-awaited *Hunger Games*, a series of controversial messages conveyed via Twitter overtly demonstrated that many were disappointed to see that the young character Rue was played by a child of color (Rosen, 2012). Despite the fact that Rue was described as having dark skin in the preceding novel by the same name, a Twitter user indicated they were expecting to see a white child due to the character's innocence. One Twitter user brazenly stated, "Awkward moment when Rue is some black girl and not the innocent blonde girl you picture." Another Twitter user noted their lack of empathy regarding the fate of Rue, noting, "...when I found out Rue was black, her death wasn't as sad." (Goldberg, 2012; Holmes, 2012). The statements made by the aforementioned social media users conspicuously denote the association made by many in terms of the concepts of innocence, empathy, and race.

Ironically, a cinematic portrayal of society's inability to connect or empathize with children of color, and black children as especially, as victims was demonstrated in the widely popular *A Time to Kill* (Warner Brothers, 1996). The central character of little Tonya Hailey provoked the crucial notion that children of color are not perceived as victims despite enduring an unconscionable experience. Although she was an elementary school-aged girl, Tonya Hailey was a dark-skinned, African-American—symbolically the diametrical converse to the usual child victim archetype seen in many dramatic films.

To provide a brief synopsis, after being brutally beaten, raped, and hung by admitted white supremacists, Tonya's father takes matters into his own hands and kills those who raped his daughter fearing they will not be held proportionately accountable by a Southern court. Sensing that his client is likely to be found guilty, McConaughy's character, a white attorney, asks the jury to close their eyes and open their imaginations as he gives a poignant closing argument where he recounts in graphic detail the rape and torture of Tonya. (His concerns are actually valid, as the audience is witness to the jury taking an informal vote outside of the courtroom that reveals they are convinced of his guilt.) Once he finishes providing the jury and the rest of the courtroom with a graphic description of Tonya's brutal rape, he ends by saying, "now imagine she's white." Instantly,

the faces of the jury (as well as the judge) reveal a dramatic change in their perception of the actions taken by Jackson's character.

It should be noted that, in an earlier scene, Tonya's father urged his attorney to make the jury see or understand his actions through the eyes of the attorney indicating that the attorney and the jury have comparable views of society. Once Tonya's experience was framed through a lens through which the jury could identify, the collective empathy for Tonya and Tonya's father was immediate resulting in an acquittal. The conclusion of *A Time to Kill* (Warner Brothers, 1996) demonstrated that in order for a child of color to be viewed as a victim, the child must be first viewed in an acceptable form—a representative of the hegemonic archetype with the capacity to provoke empathy among audiences.

Adultification and Dehumanization of Black Youth

The perception of children as less innocent and more mature frequently spurs the projection of expectations and stereotypes on to them by members of society. This phenomenon, often referred to adultification, is quite often the experience of many black youth (Arnett, 2008).

A growing body of literature has begun to reveal the different standards to which African American/black children are held in comparison to their white counterparts, particularly in the criminal justice arena (Epstein et al., 2017; Gonzalez Van Cleve, 2016; Goff et al., 2014; Henning, 2013; Graham & Lowery, 2004). Statistics show that black youth comprise over half of youth transferred to adult court (Alexander, 2010). Moreover, black youth are five times more likely than their white peers to be referred to the adult court system for adjudication (Henning, 2013). This may be, in part, due to the perception of black youth as older than their actual age, as Goff et al. (2014) determined that black youth, on average, were perceived as being four years older than their actual age. Likewise, the level of perceived innocence of black children older than the age of 10 was equated with the level of perceived innocence of white children in older age groups (Goff et al., 2014).

The above revelations are by no means newly emerging phenomena. Historical record demonstrates that black boys especially have long been held to a higher, or harsher, standard (Graham & Lowery, 2004). One of the most notorious examples of the different standards to which male children of color are held was in the 1958 "Kissing Case". The Kissing Case gained prominence in the headlines after two black boys, ages 7 and 9, were arrested and beaten by local police in North Carolina after a neighborhood friend of the two boys told her parents one evening that she kissed one of the boys on the cheek while playing earlier that day.

In the same manner that black boys have been, and continue to be, treated harshly for their actions, or perceived actions, black girls must also contend with criticism and punishment derived from stereotypes traditionally projected on to black women (DuMonthier et al., 2017). Results of a survey conducted by the Center on Poverty and Inequality at Georgetown University unveiled that many adults perceive black girls ages 10 to 14 be less innocent and more sexually knowledgeable than white

girls of the same age (Epstein et al., 2017). Such perceptions betray, or contradict, 2017 findings by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention which found no difference in the percentage of black teenage girls who are sexually active or experienced versus the percentage of white teenage girls who are sexually active or experienced (Abma & Martinez, 2017). Study investigators at Georgetown University also discovered that black girls are deemed to be more independent and in less need of protection than their white female peers. Such perceptions may consequently account for the higher number of school disciplinary actions. A separate report released by the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that black girls are consistently penalized a disproportionate rate in comparison to their white female peers (DuMonthier et al., 2017).

In 2013, the Department of Education released a report that provided what was to many an astonishing portrait of disparities within school systems nationwide. Unlike many reports released by the Department of Education that typically focus on students' capabilities in reading and arithmetic, the aforementioned report assessed disciplinary actions taken against students for violations of school rules and regulations (McCray, 2015). Statistics within the report revealed that black students are three times more likely than their white counterparts to be punished for the same offenses. The report also revealed that black children are more likely to be the recipients of harsh disciplinary for actions relatively mild offenses for which their white counterparts received little to no punishment. Moreover, in a separate report, Rovner (2021) released findings showing that, although black students comprise 16% of public school students, they account for 31% of all school-related arrests—potentially placing them in the school to prison pipeline.

The past categorization and treatment of black children as chattel, and the persisting undergirding images of such, tends to eclipse societal views of black youth. More explicitly, the indelible imagery of black children as criminals, or chattel to be bought and sold for the purposes of labor, has undoubtedly facilitated the dehumanization of black youth and eclipsed societal views of black youth as vulnerable. According to Goff et al., at the crux of their investigations was the universal consideration that children are vulnerable human beings in need of protection. However, investigators also acknowledged that those persons belonging to historically dehumanized groups, such as black Americans, are often not afforded the same fundamental considerations by society at large (Goff et al., 2014; Thompson, 2013; Apel, 2009). Using a mixed methods approach, Goff et al. (2014) determined that non-minorities are less likely to perceive people of color as vulnerable upon being showed repeated images of gorillas acting in a violent manner. While the study investigators initially speculated that study participants would express sentiments of innocence in relation to children, it was determined that, upon the conclusion of data analysis, whites tended to conflate the images of gorillas with those of black children as well thereby obscuring their perception of black children as vulnerable or even child-like.

Conclusion

Goff et al.'s study results expand on a previous study that revealed police officers were more likely to discharge their weapons when presented with images of black faces versus white faces (Peruche & Plant, 2006). The results of Peruche and Plant also revealed that, when shown pictures of possible suspects in a hypothetical lineup, police officers were also more likely to select those with stereotypical African-American features such as wide noses and full lips (Peruche & Plant, 2006). Such snap decisions based on an individual's race have also impacted children of color. As such, society's overall perception of them as individuals not entitled to the privileges of childhood or citizens protected by the law persist. In multiple instances, the punitive treatment of children of color has, at times, been traumatic and even irreversible. Of the most notable examples are the killings of Tamir Rice and Aiyana Stanley-Jones. Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old little boy, was playing at a park with a toy gun. Police arrived on the scene and killed Tamir within seconds of arriving on the scene. No attempt was made to engage Tamir in discussion or to determine if his gun was, in fact, a toy. In contrast, law enforcement personnel have arrested white males armed with actual semi-automatic weapons following mass shootings. Like Tamir, Aiyana Stanley-Jones was a 9-year-old girl who was killed while sleeping on a couch in her home. Police officers, filming a reality television show, charged the front door of her home and began shooting immediately upon entry. Ultimately, the police officer who fired the fatal gunshot was arrested but not convicted of her murder after two trial juries failed to find the officer guilty. One could contend that the juries' failure to convict potentially speaks to society's inability to view children of color as vulnerable.

Although not an incident involving a fatality, in the summer of 2015, a police officer made headlines after detaining a teenage black girl in attendance at a pool party. According to various news reports, the police officer had instructed the girl to walk away after a brief verbal encounter. After complying with the officer's instructions, the police officer then opted to run after the teenage girl and pull her to the ground by her hair. He then sat on her (Fantz et al., 2015). Members of the public were aware of the events, as they were recorded by other teenagers present at the pool party. More specifically, they were recorded by white teenagers who were also present at the party and allowed to roam freely while their black counterparts were randomly detained by police as well as private citizens.

The above examples are but a few of the experiences of black children on a regular basis. The manner in which black children have been constructed and depicted by the media has undoubtedly had similar effects to those of the stereotypical media images of black men and women. Historically, media images and social rhetoric have tremendously influenced the manner in which select topics and populations have been viewed (Hill-Collins, 2000; Hooks, 2000; Roberts, 2017). In her book *The Hollywood Jim Crow* (Erigha, 2019) contended that "movies and images are symbolic vehicles that shape audience perceptions and exert influence beyond the screen." Of those images, Erigha noted that they project stereotypes

...that they project stereotypes that not only influence individual people but also shape crucial social factors such as politics, racial attitudes, and treatment by authority, namely employers and law enforcement (2019: 29).

As Roberts delineated in 1997, the rhetoric emitting from media images of black mothers in receipt of welfare resulted in punitive policies directed towards single black mothers on welfare. Likewise, studies have determined, for example, that the media's depiction of public health issues has a significant impact on how the overall citizenry views the causes and potential resolutions of a problem (Brochu et al., 2014; McClure et al., 2011). Hence, the historical, repeated depictions of black children living in areas replete with criminal and immoral behaviors fuels the adultification of black children resulting in pervasive, negative experiences within various social institutions. Further research should be conducted to determine the extent to which such negative media portrayals impact black children's lived experiences in school and other public settings.

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