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Archetypes, stereotypes and media representation in a multi-cultural society

Mary Anna Kidd*

Department of Communication, 3900 University Blvd., University of Texas at Tyler, Tyler, TX 75799, USA

Abstract

One of the challenges for a multi-cultural society is how to foster effective intercultural, or inter-group, relations. Since some members of a large country may have little to no interaction with some of the other groups in their society, mediated images may be the only way they can learn about each other. Thus, the media have a powerful role to play, and need to ensure that they neither continually reinforce negative stereotypes nor omit representation of all co-cultures in the mediated world. This paper discusses the problem and proposes one possible solution.

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1. Introduction

One issue in a multi-cultural society is how to promote positive relationships among the different people groups that form that society. This is a particular challenge in large populations where individuals may never interact with members of other groups due to either economic isolation or ethnic segregation. In these situations, the only ‘interaction’ they may have is with a media depiction of the co-cultural groups. Thus, media producers and media educators share a responsibility to teach future writers, directors and producers how to create stories which promote inclusion and understanding.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-903-566-7076; fax: +1-903-566-7287.

E-mail address: makidd78@yahoo.com

2. Archetypes

Media producers face certain basic challenges when developing dramatic programs. One of the primary challenges is telling a complete story in a short time period. The audience needs to be able to identify the basic characters' roles quickly. Who is the hero? Who is the lover? Who is the innocent? The ability to identify these characters is vital to be able to understand the basic storyline of a movie or television series. We recognize these roles through the use of archetypes.

The concept of the archetype was originally developed by Jung. His analysis was related to dreams which were filled with basic motifs analogous to mythical characters (Jung, 2013). Archetypes can be found in everything from Andes folklore (Shaev and Samoylova, 2013) to classic films such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolfe?* (Falsafi, Khorashad, and Abedin, 2011).

According to Faber and Mayer (2009), modern archetypes have the following characteristics:

- They are story characters.
- They are represented psychologically as mental models like self- and other-schema and prototypes.
- They often elicit intense emotional responses.
- They operate at an unconscious level.
- They are culturally enduring so are easily learned and widely recognizable (p. 308).

Two other elements that are important to remember when discussing archetypes is that the audience identifies these characters as "mental models" of themselves and others, and that these characters evoke powerful emotions (Falsafi, Khorashad, and Abedin, 2011).

From the storytelling viewpoint, the use of archetypes is good and necessary. You want audiences to tune in, relate to the characters, and feel the various emotions appropriate to the genre. In and of themselves, archetypes are valuable and necessary components of a story. However, it is when these archetypes are married to stereotypes that concerns arise for media management in a multi-cultural society.

3. Stereotypes

An archetype is the basic character that moves a story forward, such as Prince Charming as the hero and Cinderella as the Innocent, and is applicable in multiple cultures. However, stereotypes are very culture specific. In many cultures, certain groups are seen as possessing specific, often negative, characteristics. Individuals within those groups are treated as if these negative stereotypes are true, which is seldom the case.

The concept of the stereotype was developed by Lippman (1922) to explain how people are influenced by and make sense of mediated messages. His idea was that we develop stereotypes as mental maps to help us cope with the complexity of groups and peoples. In this sense, a stereotype is a neutral system of classification. However, the modern definition focuses on the problems inherent in portraying a co-culture using trite, limited characteristics.

Research has shown that negative images that relate to stereotypes of minority populations, such as African Americans and Latinos in the United States, can lead to negative interpretations of their actions (Mastro and Kopacz, 2006). Mastro and Kopacz's research revealed that these stereotyped characters can also have an effect on policy decisions and voting behaviors. In other words, these decisions can be based on negative stereotypes triggered by media depictions instead of the actual characteristics of the population. When people watch shows with characters who are familiar and similar to them, they identify with them positively. "In other words, the more similar an in-group or out-group target is to the relevant characteristic of the perceiver's in-group, the more favorable the evaluation" (Mastro and Kopacz, 2006, p. 309). However, when the differences are highlighted, they tend to see the groups in a negative light. This can hold true particularly for those who do not often encounter the stereotyped groups (Signorielli, 2009).

Racial minorities are not the only groups who face negative media portrayals. Cooke-Jackson and Hanson (2008) explored the ethical concerns about portrayals of poor, Southern white Americans from the Appalachian region of the USA. Discussing the problems associated with stereotyping, they write:

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