



The effect of television viewing on ethnic prejudice against immigrants: A study in the Italian context



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ABSTRACT

Television viewers construct many different meanings from the programs they watch. Here, we investigated whether ethnic prejudice is differentially influenced by the genre of television programs in their portrayal of ethnic minorities. We also wanted to determine whether a higher educational level reduces ethnic prejudice and television use. A self-reported questionnaire was administered to 401 Italian adults. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze the relationships between ethnic prejudice and television program contents and educational level. Viewing Reality and Variety Shows was positively related to ethnic prejudice, News and Public Affairs was negatively related, and Films and TV series had no apparent influence on prejudice. Educational level was negatively related to both ethnic prejudice and watching Reality and Variety Shows, and positively related to viewing News and Public Affairs and Films and TV series programs.

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1. Mass media and intergroup relations

The mass media plays a powerful and pervasive role in framing our beliefs, perceptions, and collective emotions. How it articulates social issues has shaped our attitudes toward them. Much of the research on mass media and intergroup relations falls into two camps. The one argues that the mass media reinforces the status quo and plays a very specific part in the distribution and acceptance of ethnic ideologies (Maneri & ter Wal, 2005; Mazzara, 2008; Pharr, 1996, Van Dijk, 1991, 2000; Volpato, Durante, Gabbiadini, Andrighetto, & Mari, 2010). Accordingly, the media occupies a preeminent place in the public representation of unequal social relations. As Cottle (2000) states, "It is in and through representations, for example, that members of the media audience are variously invited to construct a sense of who 'we' are in relation to who 'we' are not" (p. 2). The other points out that the mass media actively criticizes and questions the status quo, thus representing a significant agent for driving sociopolitical and cultural change (Bodenhausen, Schwarz, Bless, & Wanke, 1995; Vrij, van Schie, & Cherryman, 1996; Tsuda, 2004).

But while the media has been, can be and should be put to good use to reduce intergroup tension and prejudice (Paluck, 2009), it oftentimes plays an ambivalent role, being neither clearly positive nor negative, though never a neutral one. As an illustration of this, Tsuda (2004) notes that the media frequently 'cheats' on its audience, presenting them with antithetical images which apparently strengthen dominant ideologies and stereotypes but erode them as well. This is also why the portrayal by the media of social and minority groups within a society (e.g., the elderly, women, gays and lesbians, the

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disabled) inevitably raises questions about whether and to what extent such depictions promote or undermine the values of equity, democracy, and justice in a pluralist society.

Here, we focus on the representation of ethnic minority groups by the mass media and the relation between mass media consumption and ethnic prejudice against immigrants. The term “mass media” covers a wide spectrum of printed (e.g., newspapers and magazines) and broadcast media (e.g., television and radio), as well as newer forms of electronic media (e.g., the Internet and videogames). Although each medium needs to be understood and critiqued for how it handles prejudice and discrimination, we chose television because, along with radio, it is the predominant outlet for entertainment and news and because, as Signorielli (2001) notes, television has become the “nation’s primary storyteller” (p. 36). Furthermore, television audience reception research has suggested that audiences may infer norms from the behavior of real or fictional media personalities (Shapiro & Chock, 2003) and that programs featuring members of ethnic groups cast in protagonist or other roles in the narrative of various genres (e.g., News or Entertainment) can differentially influence racial perceptions (Armstrong, Neuendorf & Brentar, 1992). Therefore, we wanted to examine the influence of viewing three different television genres (films, news, entertainment) on ethnic prejudice and television consumption.

2. Ethnic prejudice and television

Prejudice and discrimination against ethnic minorities is ubiquitous. Outright rejection of diversity is deemed generally unacceptable in Western societies, and blatant prejudice is seldom expressed directly because the normative climate makes “old-fashioned” prejudice socially unpalatable in its raw form. It does not necessarily follow, however, that prejudice has disappeared from an individual’s cognitive and affective world. In the discourse on the justification of inequality, the term *modern racism* has been coined to describe this phenomenon and to distinguish between “old” and “new” forms of prejudice.

Dovidio and Gaertner (1998), for example, argue that “discrimination occurs when an aversive racist can justify or rationalize a negative response on the basis of some factor other than race” (p. 7). Sears (1988) claims that modern ethnic prejudice is characterized by denial of continued discrimination, antagonism toward minority group demands, and resentment over perceived, undeserved special treatment of minority groups. Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) argue that the discourse of prejudice has become “cool, distant and indirect” (p. 58) in its defense of traditional values, exaggeration of cultural differences, and denial of positive emotions. Unlike *modern racism*, old-fashioned racism can be expressed more openly and directly.

The mainstream media has increased the visibility of immigration. News coverage of the successive waves of immigrant arrivals to Italy, though it may stoke fears the public already has toward them, tends to focus on the drama of a newsworthy event. What has become problematic for the media is the growing long-term presence of ethnic minorities. It may even be argued that the media perpetuates the perceived threat to national identity by tapping into anti-immigrant sentiments in more subtle ways. If today’s public debate is polarized (often by the mainstream media itself), early television was notable for its virtual absence or underrepresentation of ethnic minority groups. Previous work on the portrayal of ethnic minorities in television investigated how misrepresentations can potentially fuel racism and prejudice and confirm the negative stereotypes many television viewers hold about ethnic groups (Graves, 1999; Graves & Ottaviani, 1995; Greenberg & Brand, 1994; Greenberg & Collette, 1997; Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002).

Moreover, the underrepresentation of certain ethnic groups might have led television viewers to underestimate the power and importance of such groups within society. In recent decades, however, increasing attention has been directed to how television tends to give a more nuanced depiction of ethnic minorities (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Monk-Turner, Heiserman, Johnson, Cotton, & Jackson, 2010). Nonetheless, data suggest that the range of roles in which ethnic minority groups are cast as protagonists still tends to be narrow and stereotyped, and that certain ethnic minorities are overrepresented as perpetrators of crime or linked to deviant or criminal behavior, whereas voice is rarely given crime victims who belong to an ethnic minority.

Summarizing, the interests and perspectives of ethnic minorities are not represented proportionally to the ethnic population and are presented in a simplistic and unidimensional way. Furthermore, negative media coverage of ethnic minorities as a risk to society has contributed to the build-up of prejudice against them.

3. The current study

If previous research has largely investigated the influence of television consumption on promoting or reducing ethnic prejudice, to our knowledge no study to date has examined the influence of different genres on ethnic prejudice. To fill this gap, we wanted to determine whether viewing different television genres can influence ethnic prejudice and, if so, in which direction.

We expected that:

- (1) Exposure to different genres differentially influences ethnic prejudice against immigrants. Armstrong et al. (1992) reported that exposure to the genres entertainment and news was associated with conflicting perceptions of African-Americans. They studied the effects on viewers’ beliefs about the socioeconomic status of Black Americans and found that the entertainment genre was associated with a positive perception and television news with a negative one. Twenty years later, Hoekstra, Stos, Swendson, and Hoekstra (2012) found in a sample of American students that the proportion of Black individuals in their dreams was increased by television consumption in general and by a preference for

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