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A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN SITCOMS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE PROFESSIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE

THESIS

BY

TAMARA D. ALLEN

2005

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A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN SITCOMS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE PROFESSIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate School

of Texas Southern University

By

Tamara D. Allen, B.S.

Texas Southern University

2005

Approved By

James H. Ward

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AFRICAN AMERICAN SITCOMS: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN SITCOMS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE PROFESSIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE

By

Tamara D. Allen, M.S.

Texas Southern University, 2005

Dr. J. W. Ward, Advisor

For decades white writers, producers and directors have controlled African American sitcoms and they decide what information is decimated to the public about African Americans. The perceptions of white writers, producers, and directors of African Americans have filtered racial misconceptions harming the African American community. Previous research shows that African Americans have been portrayed as clowns, servants, and buffoons in African American sitcoms, thus creating negative stereotypes.

This study researches behavior and the language used in African American sitcoms and the affect they have on the professional African American woman in the workplace and in public settings. One hundred and thirty-four professional African American women were surveyed to conduct the research.

The study found that professional African American women have encountered non-African Americans using Ebonics, African American Vernacular, Black Speak or

"black street slang" to communicate with them in a professional setting, as well as public settings. Although a major of the women surveyed graduated from college or received post professional degrees and speak Standard English in the workplace they have been offend by non-African Americans who have changed their dialect to communicate with them. To increase the validity of the present study, the researcher should include a focus group and open the study up to African American men and non-African Americans.

Approved By

James Dr. Ward — Chairperson, Thesis Committee — 9/19/05 — Date

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The television is one element most Americans have in common, yet it is the one thing that divides the nation. Through the researchers findings, the media influences its viewer's thoughts and opinions, with sometimes erroneous information, especially in situational comedies through jokes, characters behavior and language and that information leads to negative stereotypes. The researcher concluded that this is particularly true when it comes to African American sitcoms. Some sitcoms with all black cast members display blacks as clowns, buffoons and the inability to master the art of Standard English; these characters perpetuate negative stereotypes about African Americans in general. Geneva Smitherman (2000) holds scholar elites responsible for disseminating to the lay public unacquainted with sociolinguists theory responsible for the disrespect of the African American language. She says, rather than writing and speaking to the people, the scholars communicated among themselves and allowed their descriptions of black speech to be reproduced through lay channels such as the media, to audiences lacking the "objectivity" of the "scientist". In the American mind-set, these descriptions served to reinforce the worst stereotypes of black people as clowns, low-life, and sex-crazed (Smitherman, 2000). If African Americans want to change the overall perception of the black individual, it is imperative that sitcoms produce realistic characters and realistic situations to change the views of other Americans. There is a direct relationship between African American sitcoms and the language used in them that perpetuate negative stereotypes that affect the professional African American female; in addition, these negative stereotypes help to distort the African American image.

Blacks have been more visible on prime-time television in the last decade; however, they have been germane to situational comedies. As a result, these African American sitcoms continue to produce negative stereotypes. These negative stereotypes have affected the African American community, in addition to stigmatizing the African American female, the pillar of the Black community. Though there are many negative stereotypes perpetuated in African American sitcoms, the researcher will focus on (1) the language and behavior of character(s) in African American sitcoms and the influence they have on society; (2) if non-African Americans are using the African American language to communicate with African Americans; and (3) negative stereotypes as it relates to language in sitcoms and the affect they have on the professional African American woman.

The Unrealistic Behaviors of Characters in African American Sitcoms

Stereotypes have existed since Blacks were first allowed to perform on television. Blacks were first portrayed as servants, clowns, and buffoons. In the earlier days of comedy shows Blacks were mostly the butt of all jokes when they were included in episodes. Negative stereotypes continue to survive, because Black sitcoms have usually included characters with unrealistic or outrageous behavior patterns. If Blacks were not portrayed as clowns and idiots they were pitted against one another often called "playing the dozens. For example, J. J. and Thelma (*Good Times*) were constantly bickering and insulting one another with rhyming insults, and George Jefferson and his maid Florence (*The Jefferson's*) were always "shucking and jiving", also know as playing the dozens. As well as, Fred Sanford and Aunt Esther in *Sanford and Son* frequently offended one other another by calling names such as "You fish-eyed fool." Smitherman (2000) refers

to this as black speech events, signifying, shucking, joke telling, "jive talking" and "ghetto speech" in "Dyn-O-Mite" television shows and local and national press. Though "playing the dozens" does exist in the African American community it is not apart of the everyday life of all African Americans. An outsider of the African American culture may view these sitcoms and believe that Blacks behave like that all the time; and from those portrayals of African Americans in sitcoms negative stereotypes are developed. Ron Scott an African American TV producer in Detroit agrees that Black sitcoms where the characters are constantly teasing one another do nothing to promote real life sensitivities (Long, 2002).

In order to reduce negative stereotypes such as unrealistic or outrageous behavior in situational black comedies African Americans must be represented in network programming. According to the Writer's Guild of America, 1,334 writing jobs at the six major networks were filled and only 83 went to African Americans (McGee, 2003). Hiring more African Americans, female and male in key professional entertainment positions such as sociolinguist scholars, executives, creators, writers, producers and directors, would help to improve the image of the African American individual and community, and deter ridiculous antic and unrealistic behaviors in sitcoms.

Negative Stereotypes Create Low Self-Esteem

Television is similar to brainwashing; it can influence attitudes, beliefs and values of its audience. Gary Anderson an artistic director of Detroit's Plowshares Theater says he "fears all TV viewers, no matter what ethnicity, buy into the buffoonish black presentations they see on TV" (Long, 2002). If this is true African Americans are included in this theory and low self-esteem can be derived from unrealistic or outrageous

behaviors on sitcoms. Research and social learning theory propose African Americans learn negative self-images from negative television programming. Research also reveals that there is a direct relationship between high exposure to television and low self-esteem among African Americans but not for whites (Tan and Tan, 1979).

Stereotyping can be minimized if blacks are shown in sitcoms, as well as dramas emphasizing the realities of African American life. African American women especially need to be shown in dramas to reduce the stereotype that black women are constantly argumentative, anger and rude. Blacks are under-represented in dramas, it seems that they are non-existent in these capacities and this creates stereotypes about black people. African American women must be shown in diverse roles and not just confined to comedies or sidekick characters to white actors. African Americans are less likely to be seen in prime-time dramas; but when blacks are placed in roles outside of comedies, their characters are limited and sometimes stripped of personality. African Americans should be in serious leading roles in dramas to demonstrate their talent, and to show the realities of Black life. Focusing on the concerns of African Americans through sitcoms and dramas reinforces the values, beliefs, education, and home-life of the black family and aids in reducing negative stereotypes. In addition, network-programming distribution must be dispersed evenly. Black sitcoms are germane to two nights a week, Monday and Friday nights. There are six major networks and the majority of the black sitcoms are shown on the two least watched stations, United Paramount Network and The Warner Brothers (Hunt, 2002). Though UPN has a total of six all Black cast sitcoms, UPN is currently ranked the second least watched evening network. The three major networks American Broadcasting Company Columbia Broadcasting System, and National

Broadcasting Company all together have a total of two Black sitcoms. ABC and NBC both have one show starring black cast members and CBS has a total of zero. The television is the gateway to understanding different cultures and the three major networks are helping to perpetuate negative stereotypes by excluding blacks from their networks. Low self-esteem can be caused by negative portrayals of Africans Americans in sitcoms. It is a necessary to study the outcome of unrealistic and outrageous behaviors of characters in black sitcoms.

Purpose of Study

Based on the preceding and objectives, the current investigation will attempt to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1: What message is sent to the community about African American women and the language used in African American sitcoms and are African American women portrayed fairly?

Research Question 2: Are non-African Americans adopting the African American language and using it in the workplace because they view African American sitcoms?

Research Question 3: Does the behavior of African American characters in African American sitcoms affect the Professional African American woman?

Definition of Terms

African American: Americans, delineated by race, who are descendants of Africa (Coleman, 2000).

Assimilationst Era: Discourse characterized by a rejection of Blackness to the extent that there is no reference to Black culture, there are no sociopolitical conflicts, and difference yield to mainstream conformity (Coleman, 2000).

Black/Blackness: Cultural signifiers to describe generally shared histories, experiences, issues and concerns, and social situatedness of African Americans (Coleman, 2000).

Black Situation Comedies (Sitcoms): A weekly open-ended series of thirty minute, self contained episodes that revolves around a single situation and has a regular core cast of African American characters that works to illuminate the Black cultural, artistic, political, and economic experiences (as cited in Hough, 1981, Coleman, 2000).

Blackvoice: An odd type oral cacography, and mispronunciations, sometimes referred to as Black language (Coleman, 2000).

Black Speak/: Is a language that resonates truth by infusing its messages with the linguistic style that formulates and informs cultural identities and communities; or is based in the sense of community evoked by and attributed to the cultural/communicative form (Brown, 2002).

Ebonics: A mixture of European and African languages born of the African American slave trade (Baugh, 2000; Smitherman, 2000)

Minstrel Show: A show comprised of several comedic presentation styles: stand-up comedy, and variety show skits; or a well crafted and tightly formulaic, moved into the realm of infamy because it relied heavily on racial lampooning, highlighted by bigoted blackface routines A weekly open-ended series of thirty minute, self contained episodes that revolves around a single situation and has a regular core cast of African American

characters that works to illuminate the Black cultural, artistic, political, and economic experiences (as cited in Hough, 1981, Coleman, 2000).

Negative Portrayals (Stereotypes): Inaccurate popular concepts that are applied indiscriminately to individuals without regard for those individuals' actual characteristics (Coleman, 2000).

Neo-Minstrelsy: The full circle that Black situation comedy has come in its treatment of Blackness, explicitly acknowledging a renewed emphasis upon the ridicule and the subordination of Black culture as homogeneously deviant (Coleman, 2000).

Social Learning Theory: The learning that occurs with a social context. It considers that people learn from one another, including such concepts as observational learning, imitation, and modeling (Bandura & Walters, 1963).

Standard English: Deemed acceptable by the prestigious social class in society (Smitherman, 2000).

Stereotypes: A conventional formulaic oversimplified conception opinion or opinion (Coleman, 2002).

Style Switch (Code switching): Refers to a speaker's alternative use of different styles of speaking (Seymour & Seymour, 1979).

The following chapter will review previous research on the following: minstrel shows, black sitcoms, black women in sitcoms, social learning theory, negative stereotypes in black sitcoms, black language, black women and language, self-image as a result of black sitcoms, linguistics used in black sitcoms, professional African American women in the workplace.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The media no longer practices obvious racism, it is hidden in jokes, images, and the language used by black characters that encourage negative stereotype about African Americans. Nevertheless, the media has control over images displayed on television. People are influenced by what they see and hear on television, regardless of truth or lies; what one sees on television is associated with accuracy. People look to the media to validate their beliefs and this encourages racism and prejudices views. When images are not portrayed accurately, it distorts the whole identity of an entire cultural. This is particularly true when it comes to African Americans and their portrayal in the media. African Americans are a diverse people and what may be true for one is not always true for others. However, society has the tendency to clump the entire culture together. Because of the erroneous perceptions, the whole cultural suffers due to untruths. It is imperative for African Americans to change the perception of society and produce positive and realistic images of blacks in the media. The literature will cover the history of black sitcoms, the Social Learning Theory, negative stereotypes, Black Linguistics, self-image, and African American women in the workplace.

The History of Minstrel Shows

Minstrel shows were not the first to characterize blacks and determine stereotypes about African Americans. Robin Coleman (2000) examines, *The Birth of a Nation*, as one of the first movies to stereotype Blacks. D.W. Griffith's 1915 pro-Klan, Civil War epic *The Birth of a Nation,* featured black men as brutal bucks (presented by Whites in blackfaces), rapists targeting White women, robbers and pillagers (Coleman, 2000). The

movie also provided so called "comic Negro" relief through coon characterizations of incompetent, drunk, barefoot, and chicken eating Blacks. Griffith even threw in a corpulent mammy character who, upon witnessing various African American misconducts, proclaims with amused bewilderment, "dem free niggers f'um de N' of am show crazy!" (Coleman, 2000).

Some researchers would argue that the misrepresentation of the Negro began with minstrel shows. Minstrel shows were comprised of several comedic presentation styles such as vaudevillian comedy, musical interludes, stand-up comedy, and variety show skits (Coleman, 2000). These shows relied on racial lampooning and white faces painted black to deliver punch lines. The show was usually constructed in the following manner: the performance would begin with the curtain opening to reveal a cast of dozens assembled in a choral semicircle ready to offer up a review of coon songs, comedy, and a variety of gags, skits, monologues, and speeches (Coleman, 2000). The Master of Ceremonies would appear in blackface and tuxedo, to introduce the act and engage the audience through comedy and direct address (Coleman, 2000). During the show it was the Master of Ceremonies job to correct the malapropisms and point out the stupidities of the 'plantation niggers,' he acted as kind of missing link between the 'superior audience' and the low characters portrayed on stage (Coleman, 2000).

Whites who often gained financial wealth by portraying what they deem to be true or humorous of African American's often at the expense of the African American community distorted the African American image. E.P. Christy, leader of the Christy Minstrels is said to have mocked the language of a New Orleans African American he met, incorporating it into his distortion of southern Black communication styles and

dialects (Coleman, 2000). Minstrel shows were fixated with supremacy further enhancing negative stereotypes about African Americans. The antics were outrageous, white actors painted their faces black; in addition to changing their language, dress, walk, economic status, music rituals, mannerisms, smile, and even dietary regime (recall my pickaninny sitting on a pin cushion holding a slice of water melon) to manifest negative stereotypes (Coleman, 2000). These minstrels developed several characters stereotyping blacks: Tom, Sambo, Jim Crow, mammy or Aunt Jemima. Tom short for " Uncle Tom" was in most case a house servant who met all the needs of his master without hesitation. The Jim Crow character was often portrayed as a raggedy man who sang and hobbled his way through skits (Coleman, 2000). Sambo was characterized in the same manner as the Jim Crow character, however, with one exception. Sambo's dress would vary from Jim Crow; Sambo could be seen in finely tailored, yet incredible gaudy, excessive clothing. Then there was the depiction of the "mammy" or "Aunt Jemima", one of the first White stereotypes of a jolly, overweight Black woman (Coleman, 2000). She, like Uncle Tom, was true and loyal to her master; always especially loving to the White children she was in charge of rearing (Coleman, 2000). Later in history we would see this same stereotyped character in *Beulah* (Coleman, 2000).

Minstrel shows were apart of the eighteenth-century. They addressed oral comedy where yarn tellers, tale spinners, and medicine show barkers would engage crowds. White actors and actresses painted in blackfaces used Irish folk tales and patterns of African storytelling in their presentations. Coleman (2000) explains that Whites portraying Blacks could be considered significant for its racist re-creation of the African American. These shows were a reflection of the times, social and political climate. For

example, importation of foreign slaves to American slaves on American soil, prohibition was hardly a concern among slaveholders since there was already a burgeoning slave population, and interstate slave trading was flourishing (Coleman, 2000). According to Robin Coleman (2000), the history of minstrel shows are important in documenting the stereotypes, that Whites created of Blacks and how they found their way into mass media.

From Minstrel to Radio and Television

Though blacks had always been depicted as crazed- idiot-clowns, the mass media did its part in taking these negative stereotypes to the masses. In the early twentieth-century, Blacks were portrayed as cartoon characters such as Little Black Sambo and Bugs Bunny (the latter featuring a dim-witted, blackface Elmer Fudd shooting craps), thus the racial humor in mass media began (Coleman, 2002). When the first decade was over during the twentieth century, broadcast radio started flourishing. Radio stations began popping up all throughout the United States. Family time was spent crowded around a set box, listening to comedic, dramatic, musical, how-to and soap opera programming. Whites, who had once performed as minstrel show entertainers, were now taking their roles into radio stations and performing their coon songs, plantation melodies, and comedies (Coleman, 2000). The reactions to these shows were overwhelming, and White America loved them. Whites who had played Blacks in painted faces in their Vaudeville acts transferred so-called black humor into radio. To add further insult, whites changed their dialect to mimic Blacks, in addition to adding sound effects to deliver their jokes.

According to Dates and Barlow (1990), authors of *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*, middle-class white teens began to rebel against their

parents exploring African American song and dance infusing entertainment. Dates and Barlow (1990) explains, that African Americans paid the price of the exploration of their culture by curious whites: "the price paid for this cultural transaction was a misguided and condescending dilution of the original art form, because once they entered into the mainstream of American culture, African American song, dance, and humor were appropriated either by white entertainers and/or white businessman who tailored them to their own liking and reaped the profits from their sales. Two white comedians, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll played two dimwit Negroes played on airway minstrel show known as "*Amos 'n' Andy*". Gosden and Correll pulled their bit from the original Vaudeville act "*Sam and Henry*", renaming the show "*Amos 'n' Andy*" after the two moved from WGN, a local Chicago station without network affiliation to WMAQ (Coleman, 2000, Dates & Barlow, 1990). The *Sam 'n' Henry* show, featured two laughable, addleheaded southern bumpkins meandering their way through a big northern metropolis (Coleman, 2000). Coleman (2000) explains, that they mocked the migration of African Americans leaving plantations and farms for the North in search of employment (and fleeing lynching). Gosden and Correll used what they called "Snowball" authentic southern Black dialect gleaned from the adopted son of Gosden's mammy "Snowball" (Coleman, 2000, Dates & Barlow 1990).

With its new name change "*Amos 'n' Andy*" were two country bumpkins leaving Birmingham, Alabama, for Chicago to work in a factory. The show ran for fifteen minutes, six days a week (Coleman, 2000). Amos was a classic "Tom" stereotype, trusting, simple, and unsophisticated (Dates & Barlow, 1990). Gosden and Correll used high and hesitating voices to mimic these two mythical characters designed by white

men. For example, the character Amos was often heard saying, "It's 'Ain't dat sumpin'?' when he was happy or surprised, and 'Awa, awa, awa' in the frequent moments when he was frightened or embarrassed" (Dates & Barlow, 1990). Andy, at the other extreme, was cast as a "coon" stereotype. Andy's character was characterized as domineering, a bit lazy, inclined to take credit for all Amos's ideas and efforts: "He's always 'working on the books' or 'resting his brain'." Though most of the men performing in *Amos 'n' Andy* spoke in broad dialects with poor grammar, the women are often perceived differently (Bogle, 2001). Sapphire played by Ernestine Wade is often shrewd, unable to take a breathe without raising her voice, or unable to think without complaining about something (Bogle, 2001).

Gosden and Correll help create negative stereotypes concerning African Americans. The frequency of the malapropisms used in their skits carried out the stigma that blacks lacked education and the lack of intelligence (Dates & Barlow, 1990). Coleman (2000) argues that "*Amos 'n' Andy* " did not have contact with the outside world though the comedy takes place in Harlem. Coleman (2000) asked the question: "Where is the blackvoice: where are the black professional/business class are so unprofessional or professionals they scheme, hustle, and lie?" They live in separate a world even from their peers there are no signs of the great Harlem Renaissance (Coleman, 2000). This radio series is very implicit to what the audience perceives that White America is very different. When seen, Whites are depicted as quite socially and economically functional (Coleman, 2000). The Whites who venture through never speak with malapropisms and they are never unprofessional (Coleman, 2000). They are, however, almost always aghast at this odd Black world with its funny talking people

(Coleman, 2000). "*Amos 'n' Andy*" offered catchphrases such as "I'se regusted" and " now ain't that sumpin!" colloquialism still found in the black language today (Coleman, 2000). Dates and Barlow (1990) believe that what lies at the core of "*Amos 'n' Andy*" comedy show was the idea that a typical African America is grossly ignorant of the American political system; hence, to allow Amos and Andy the right to participate in the political processes of voting, running for office, supporting candidates, and so on, would tantamount making a mockery of American democracy. In 1929, some forty million listeners tuned in to listen to the series, making it the popular radio program (Coleman, 2000).

Amos 'n' Andy paved the way for other Black situation comedies to follow. It has been reported that *Amos 'n' Andy* boosted radio sales with five million units purchased in the series' first year on the air (Coleman, 2000). *Amos 'n' Andy* was so successful that the comedy was later featured on television as a situational comedy. In 1948, Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) purchased *Amos 'n' Andy* from Gosden and Correll for an estimated two million dollars (Coleman, 2000). Though white actors with "blackvoices" had portrayed *Amos 'n' Andy* on radio, the new series, argued by CBS, must star African Americans (trained by Gosden and Correll to perform stereotypes), but only after careful series development and talent search. In the early years of "*Amos 'n' Andy*" the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People fought to have the show removed from radio broadcasting. In 1931, over seven hundred forty thousand signatures were gathered, turned in and presented to the Federal Radio Commission (Dates & Barlow, 1990). The commission ignored the petition and continued to air the show. The broadcasting network CBS took its time trying to develop "*Amos 'n' Andy*, and finally in

1951 they finally found their "Negroes" to play Amos and Andy along with other characters. Alvin Childress played Amos, Spencer Williams was Andy, Jester Hairston portrayed Henry Van Porter, Tim Moore was Kingfish, and Ernestine Wade depicted the nagging, haughty Sapphire (Coleman, 2000)

The NAACP was angry over the negative stereotypes depicted in the television series and worked aggressively to make their concerns known. The series' sponsor, Blatz Brewing reportedly contributed $40,000 per week toward the talent and time of the show (Coleman, 2000). Meanwhile, the NAACP notified Blatz Brewing and CBS that they did not approve of *Amos 'n' Andy* and demanded its cancellation. In 1951, the NAACP published a bulletin that listed reasons *Amos 'n' Andy* should be removed from the air: (1) it tends to strengthen the conclusion among uninformed and prejudiced people that Negroes are inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest; (2) every character in this one and only TV show with an all Negroes cast is either a clown or a crook; (3) Negro doctors are shown as quacks and thieves; (4) Negro lawyers are shown as slippery cowards, ignorant of their profession and without ethics; (5) Negro women are shown as cackling, screaming shrews, in big mouth close ups, using street slang, just short of vulgarity; (6) All Negroes are shown as dodging work of any kind; and (7) millions of White Americans see this *Amos 'n' Andy* picture of Negroes and think the entire race is the same. Eventually, it was ratings that brought *Amos 'n' Andy* to an end. The show had been a major public relations disaster and it 1953 CBS dropped the series (Coleman, 2000).

Amos 'n' Andy was not the only Black situational comedy dispersing negative stereotypes about African Americans. The broadcasting network ABC produced their

version of a radicalized series, a spin off from the radio comedy *Beulah* created by Marlin Hurts (Coleman, 2000). Hurt, a white male actor, played Beulah, in mammy fashion through blackvoice: "Somebody bawl for Beulah?" on the radio series. She was a true mammy witty, acerbic, and a fiercely loyal maid, ever in service to her White "family" (Coleman, 2000). However, like *Amos 'n' Andy* characters on CBS's televised series, ABC sought out a black actress to play Beulah. Three different actresses Ethel Waters, Hattie McDaniel, and Louise Beavers portrayed Beulah during its run on ABC (Coleman, 2000).

The NAACP also found negative stereotypes in *Beulah* and complained heavily to the network. Beulah was a maid constantly fixing her employers, the Henderson, problems. She spent a considerable amount of her time in the Henderson's kitchen, because she did not appear to have much of a life outside of it-no family and very few friends (Coleman, 2000). Despite the talent of all three ladies who played Beulah, network television's introduction to the African American woman as popular nighttime series star, had presented the Black woman as a familiar nurturer, without a home or much of a life of her own, gave way to the stereotypes and distortions about African American life that television would trade in for years to come (Bogle, 2001). As *Amos 'n' Andy* succumbed to low ratings so did *Beulah*. After the demise of *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah*, the two shows took racist stereotypes with them. Even more importantly, they took African American actors and actresses with them. It would be nearly 20 years before blacks found themselves working again on television. Twenty years later blacks would appear in what is now called Black sitcoms.

Defining Black Situation Comedies

How is a black sitcom defined? Black sitcoms are defined as open-ended series of thirty minute, self-contained episodes that revolves around a single situation (Coleman, 2000). Black sitcoms are unique because they project Black culture, artistic, political, and economic experiences. In addition, they possess subgenres, where Black sitcoms on occasion have African American creators, producers, writers, or directors (Coleman, 2000). Black characters in these sitcoms have limited contact with other races or ethnicities (Coleman, 2000). Furthermore, the black characters employ Black language and verbal forms (often blackvoice or coon gibberish), and tend to focus on "Black issues" such as racism (Coleman, 2000). Lastly, Black sitcoms are stereotypical characterizations and ridicule is often used to promote humor (Coleman, 2000).

Twenty Years After Amos 'n' Andy

Blacks had danced and sung, clowned and served for white folks in past time comedies like *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah*, but the time had come for a new type of Negro. It had been nearly 20 years since *Amos 'n' Andy* and White creators of Black sitcoms decided that the new Black characters would have to be content and amiable in their environments (Coleman, 2000). If blacks should return to television, the network understood that they had to shed the minstrel stereotypes and instead be more "real" (Coleman, 2000). Thus, the Assimilationist Era (1968-1971) occurred, African Americans returned to starring roles in situational comedies with three shows, *Julia* (1968-1971), the *Bill Cosby Show* (1969-1971, and *Barefoot in the Park* (1970-1971). Assimilationst discourse is characterized by a rejection of Blackness to the extent that there is no reference to Black culture, there are no sociopolitical conflicts, and difference

yields to mainstream conformity (Coleman, 2000; Dates & Barlow, 1990). This period was considered the post-civil war movement era. Just as minstrelsy had eased Whites through the Civil War, and radio smoothed over the Great Migration, the assimilationist era also served as an ideological purpose of offering up a needed "settled aura" (Coleman, 2000). Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichaels' Black Power philosophy, made some White Americans nervous over the new Black militancy. Therefore, the "White Negro" was created for White Americans.

White image-makers believed if they reduced racist imagery and avoided all racial discourse, then all would be right with America. However, they got it wrong, because the absence of race and discourse signified false and negative representations and added to negative stereotypes. Black subjectivity failed to emerge during this era (Coleman, 2000). *Julia* was the first of the assimilationist shows, and it bore the brunt of criticism over assimilate characterizations (Coleman, 2000). *Julia* premiered in 1968 as a creation of Hal Kanter. The series starred Diahann Carroll (Dates & Barlow, 1990). Julia was a comfortable middle class nurse who was raising her six-year-old son, alone (Coleman, 2000). She lived in a lavish, integrated predominantly White apartment building and surrounded herself with White friends. *Julia* was as an accommodations program, where skin color of the lead characters was the only difference between this program and others on the air (Dates & Barlow, 1990). The show encountered attacks on its "realness". The issue again was Black life and culture (Coleman, 2000). Diahann Carroll played widowed nurse who wore designer clothes and had few problems that were typical of African American women living in that period. *Julia* fell in line with

white shows like "*Ozzie and Harriet*," Julia's world focused on "happy problems," such as explaining where babies came from to her son (Dates & Barlow).

While Julia explained to her son where babies come from, critics were fuming with complaints of the absence of the Black male in the household. Coleman (2000) argues that Julia communicated the Black woman as more accommodating and she reinvented the mammy stereotype. She was a docile, content servant (in service in her capacity as care-giver) (Coleman, 2000). Julia was not a threat and brought no threat with her (i.e., Black men); there was no patriarchal terms, strong male head of the household, since strength and independence in Black men may be misconstrued as frightening, as in the brutal buck stereotype (Coleman, 2000). Though Julia had mammy characteristics, writers did their best to alter her status. Julia was the head of her household, less mammy like she worked as a professional nurse, was independent and capable of living with a male figure in the home. She never encountered racial hostility. Viewers saw her as too perfect in this assimilationist role, which ultimately led to the series down fall (Coleman, 2000).

Sitcoms in the 1970s

In the 1970's more African Americans appeared in primetime series than in any other time in television history: not only in supporting roles in general with-oriented programs but also in lineups of Black-cast series that became highly popular (Bogle, 2001). However, it was Flipp Wilson, Redd Foxx, Gary Coleman, Esther Rolle, Sherman Hemsley, John Amos, and Marla Gibbs in situational comedies that provided Americans with a new type of comedy.

Premiering on NBC in January 1972 was *Sanford and Son*, a black sitcom revolving around the exploits of a Los Angeles junk dealer, Fred Sanford (Redd Foxx), and his adult son Lamont Sanford (Desmond Wilson) (Bogle, 2001). The comedy Sanford *and Son* was based on the assumption that the characters lacked intelligence; and it was a modern version of *Amos 'n' Andy*, featuring outlandish plots and one-dimensional clown characters (Dates & Barlow, 1990). According to Donald Bogle (2001), *Sanford and Son* soared in the ratings and became the most successful Black oriented series in television history. The premise of the show was about a son and father who owned a junkyard. Lamont Sanford a thirty-four, often at odds with his father, yearned to be independent but constantly chastised by his father for wanting to leave. With every attempt to leave, Lamont is confronted by his scheming and cantankerous, by his father Fred Sanford (Bogle, 2001). Fred Sanford was a stubborn bully who dominated others with his sharp tongue and ever-present anger (Dates & Barlow, 1990). Fred's favorite ploy, whenever confronted with Lamont's rebellion, was to lean back, clutch his chess, feign a heart attack, an cry out to his deceased wife, "Elizabeth, it's the big one! I'm coming to join you honey!" (Bogle, 2001).

Though the show was very popular with whites and blacks, critics complained that they were two childlike Black men with almost no ambition or drive (Bogle, 2001). Fred Sanford lazy and conniving-seemed like little more than the familiarly coon figure, forever scheming to get out of work, forever trying to get over on someone. Eugenia Collier an African American reporter for the *The New York Times* once accused the show of being "white to the core," of "encasing whiteness in a black skin. Missing altogether, she complained, was an African American consciousness." "There is nothing here that

has traditionally motivated black humor-no redemptive suffering, no strength, and no tragedy behind the humor. Fred Sanford and his little boy Lamont, conceived by white minds and based upon a white value system, are not strong black men capable of achieving-or Sanford and Son never accurately expressed what the African American audience then thought (Bogle, 2001).

Sanford and Son was so successful it was a catalyst for the other Black sitcoms. Shows like *Good Times* featuring Esther Rolle, John Amos and Jimmie Walker. Norman Lear who had success with *Al In the Family* and *Maude* created a spin-off called from the sitcom *Maude*. The show was created by African American writers Eric Monte and Mike Evans and developed into a series by Norman Lear.

Esther Rolle played a feisty maid on the sitcom *Maude* and was able to secure a role in the soon-to-be hit *Good Times*. *Good Times* was considered a breakthrough because it acknowledged poverty and other urban ills confronting a segment of the African community (Bogle, 2001). The Evans family James and Florida with their three children J.J, Thelma, and Michael lived in a tenement in Chicago. *Good Times* left no stone unturned. It was edgy, push, and in-your-face about issues like: layoffs, teen alcoholism, gang warfare, unemployment, busing and racism (Bogle, 2001).

Good Times received good and bad criticism. John J. O'Connor a writer for *The New York Times* wrote, "On the one side, Black viewers are being afforded material that provides immediate personal psychic identification. They no longer have to be content with *Father Knows Best*, which was unreal even for may white Americans. On the other side, whites are being given glimpses of Black life that, however simplified can't help but to weaken artificial racial barriers" (Bogle, 2001). Ebony magazine said it offered "the

tube's best effort to date at showing a real slice of ghetto Black life" (Bogle, 2001). Dates and Barlow (1990), said that the series was essentially an "outsider" creation in that it attempted to tell the majority population about the minority, as opposed to "insider" creations, which are designed for the minority group to contribute to its own culture and identity and to allow its to express it unique worldview.

Twenty years earlier, Blacks in minstrels had been seen clowning and buffoning for its audiences and in the 70's the same could be said for the characters on *Good Times*. J. J. Evans played by Jimmie Walker would often wear outlandish outfits floppy hats, bright shirts, ill fitting jackets, like the old style coon figure and usually didn't seem to have a serious thought in his head (Bogle, 2001). He was best know for is one-liner joke Kid *Dyn-o-mite*. "Kid Dy-No-Mite," delighted himself in schemes and lawless antics, punctuated by blackvoice and attire that seemed to come straight from Sambo's closet, the series lost any glimmer of Black subjectivity. The character J.J was no different from other black characters before him. *Good Times* potential rested in its engagement of racial and economic discrimination; however, its representational failure came when this approach was eschewed to highlight a coon/Jim Crow character as seen in J. J. Evans (Coleman, 200). He played a coon, eyes popping and facial contortions (Bogle, 2001). Esther Rolle once told *Ebony*, "Little by little with the help of the artist, I suppose, because they couldn't do that to me, they have made him more stupid and enlarged the role. I resent the imagery that says to Black kids that you can make it by standing on the corner saying 'Dyn-o-mite!'" (Bogle, 2001).

In 1974 *That's My Mamma* hit the airwaves. Clifton Davis as Clifton Curtis, a young bachelor in Washington, D.C., who takes over the barbershop left to him by his

deceased father was the show's premise. The show ran for a season and a half (Bogle, 2001). The script called for Clifton's mother to untangle the mess he created. A mother's control over her dependent son was another portrait of a fundamentally weak Black man/strong Black woman (Bogle, 2001).

Norman Lear hit the ratings (and longevity) jackpot with *The Jefferson's*, which debuted on CBS in 1975 and stayed on the air for the next 10 years (Bogle, 2001). A spin off from *All in the Family* centered on Archie's testy neighbor George Jefferson played by Sherman Hemsley, whose successful dry-cleaning business enabled him to move out of Queens into the domain of his dreams, Manhattan's hoity-toity upper East Side (Bogle, 2001). He was hell-bent on living the good life (Bogle, 2001). George Jefferson was often seen as snobbish, arrogant, petty, narrow-minded, and insensitive, he yapped and yelled at almost anyone (Bogle, 2001). Robin Coleman (2000) declares, that George Jefferson was a coon personified, on the slightest provocation; he would break out in an energetic, shuffling dance from the 1950s called the "slop."

George appeared inept in his marriage to Louise "Weazy" who exemplified a Sapphire characterization (Coleman, 2000). George Jefferson, characterized by producers as a loudmouthed braggart, spoke a great deal about "honkies" and "whites," while Louise, his wife, tried to appease him and smooth the ruffled feathers of others (Coleman, 2000). Louise Jefferson, though submissive to a degree, exercised great influence over George, because no matter what the conflict, George was never right (Coleman, 2000). *The Jeffersons* actually introduced, through the Willises, the first married interracial couple to series TV. George often tortured his counterparts, white Tom Willies and his black wife, Helen Willies with constant insults. He often referred to Mrs. Willies as

"Mrs. Night," and even going as far as referring to the interracial couple as Zebras (Bogle, 2001). Though George was obnoxious the Jefferson's appealed to white Americans because they represented African Americans who had "made it" (Coleman, 2000).

The following year after the *The Jeffersons* first aired, *What's Happening!*, aired on ABC in 1976. Inspired by the hit movie Cooley High, the most youthful-orient of the Black sitcoms revolved around three urban teenagers: Roger or Raj (Ernest Thomas), a serious and studious teen with aspirations to become a writer; Rerun (Fred Berry), overweight and full of fun; and Dwayne (Haywood Nelson), shy but trying to be hip (Bogle, 2001). *What's Happening*'s appeal belonged to the three youthful leads, whom teenage viewers (African American and white) could identify with (Bogle, 2001). The show ran until August 1979 (Bogle, 2001).

In the late 1970s white writers, producers and directors felt African American movies would be more successful if they had crossover appeal and the same was true for black sitcoms. Whenever, important Black characters appeared, they were plucked out of the African American community and dropped into a white environment, be it a family or work situation: basically a non-ethnic cultural setting which the vast white audience could readily identify with (Bogle, 2001). Some believed that the new sitcom era began interracial series. For example, *Diff'rent Strokes*, which appeared in 1978 (Bogle, 2001). Gary Coleman and Todd Bridges starred as Arnold and Willis Jackson, two orphaned Harlem lads sent to live in the Park Avenue home of Philip Drummond, a white millionaire (Bogle, 2001).

Diff'rent Strokes began in the late 1970s and ended in the early 1980s. Millionaire Drummond becomes a great white father figure, able to provide the material comforts and the cultural milieu that the Black community supposedly could never hope to match (Bogle, 2001). The subliminal message sent out was black people did not involve themselves with their own people's children when their parents died (Dates & Barlow, 1990; Bogle, 2001). Robin Coleman (2000), refers to these types of comedies as "White savior scenarios. White men became a surrogate fathers to African American children, thereby "saving" Black youth from their backgrounds (the ghetto), from their roots (an absentee and/or inadequate Black family and community), and from their Blackness (cultural differences viewed as outside the norm) (Coleman, 2000). African Americans were depicted as relying upon Whites for survival, and the closer proximity and assimilation they came to Whiteness, more worth was attributed to these abandoned Black youth (as cited in Cummings, 1988; Coleman, 2000). These programs told viewers: (a) Blackness was an impoverished condition; (b) be overcome if removed from the culture or by rejecting it, so that; (c) Whites could bestow worth and success, only if African Americans adopt the mainstream, normative ideals of Whiteness as superior (Coleman, 2000). *Diff'rent Strokes* ran for eight seasons, moving from NBC to ABC in 1985 (Bogle, 2001).

Benson was the series that closed the decade of the 70s and somewhat changed the view of the African American male, though the show still projected some negative stereotypes. Robert Guillaume first appeared in the sitcom *Soap* as Benson, the clever, outspoken butler for the Tate family. In 1979 Robert Guillaume appeared as *Benson* working for Governor Gatling as a nonthreatening, emasculated, "acceptable black

male"(Dates & Barlow, 1990). Benson fit the pattern that scripted African American male characters as innocuous true believers in the system who supported, defended, and nurtured mainstream, middle-class American values, interests, concerns, and even faults ((Date & Barlow, 1990). Robert Guillaume played a witty, and quietly subversive but dependable confidant of the governor of some mythical state, Benson was fiercely loyal to Gov. Gatling and his family (Dates & Barlow; Coleman, 2001). Benson began the series as the head housekeeper but to sociologist Herman Gray, Robert Guillaume was attractive and likeable, cool under pressure, and perhaps the quintessential black middle class professional (Dates & Barlow, 1990). The Benson character was the apex of the entire servant and helping roles that black actors had played historically in television and the movies (Dates &Barlow, 1990). Benson was a Tom characterization in his contentment, as well as an emasculated male mammy (a male Beulah and Nell) who helped rear the governor's child (Coleman, 2000). Guillaume won an Emmy for his portrayal of Benson and for his work on the series during the 1984-85 seasons.

Sitcoms in the 1980s

The 80's are labeled as the years President Ronald Regan push his conservatism ideologies on Americans. In addition, the 1980s was also a time of yuppies and buppies; of greed on Wall Street and of scandals there too; of widespread drug use and of the rise of the Moral Majority; of the emergence of a new Black middle class and of demands for an end to quotas and affirmative action; of extraordinary wealth among less than One percent of the nation's population and of debilitating poverty for others (Bogle, 2001). During this time period television program would touch issues close to Americans,

however networks would air fewer Black-cast series than in the pervious decade (Bogle, 2001). Bogle (2001), describes this period of "mixed combos for a conservative age."

One of the first comedies produced during this period was *Gimme a Break!*, which starred Nell Carter as Nell Harper, a familiar character; the hefty (almost two hundred pounds), all-knowing, all house-keeper for a widowed white police officer, Chief Carl Kanisky, his three daughters, and genial grandfather (Bogle, 2001). Sassy and independent but also supposedly warmhearted, natural, and lovable, Nell gleefully traded barbs and quips with Kanisky and the rest of the family; and their welfare, of course, always was her upper most concern (Bogle, 2001). Appearing in a mammy role mothering a motherless White family. Dates and Barlow (1990) contended, that the domestic family comedy *Gimme a Break!*, seemed to reflect a Reagan-inspired return to the Eisenhower era. The series continued the theme started by the prod but servile, cocky but nurturing, loyal mammies in the many Hollywood film classics and carried into the Eisenhower era by television's *Beulah* (Dates & Barlow, 1990). The show was a crossover hit and Nell Carter continued to play in the series, because there were few roles for African American women in the 80s (Dates & Barlow, 1990). *Gimme a Break*, followed the pattern set by a majority of African American comedies before it; it reflected mainstream beliefs and views, African American culture was not addressed, and the lead character was often irresponsible and childe like (Dates & Barlow, 1990). Like most television programs of the period, this series brought no civil/social rights problems to weekly viewers. The series lasted for six years and was cancelled in 1987.

Webster an orphaned little Black boy taken in by a white couple was a show similar to *Diff'erent Strokes*. Webster played by Emmanuel Lewis went to live with

George and Katherine Papadoplis after his parents were killed in a car accident. The series never questioned why Webster had no relatives to care for him, and like *Diff'erent Strokes* the subliminal message sent out was that black people did not involve themselves with their own people's children when their parents died (Bogle, 2001; Dates &Barlow, 1990). Unlike *Diff'rent Strokes*, on which jokes were made about race and culture, Webster, in tune with the conservative 1980s, did all it could to ignore such subjects (Bogle, 2001). The perspective of the show was for Webster to adjust to a new white environment. Robin Coleman (1990) argues, that this type of sitcom was unique only in that it combined minstrelsy with assimilationist discourse producing a television text that undermined the Black family and the Black community. *Webster* played for four seasons.

Starring Marla Gibbs (formerly Florence, the maid on " The Jeffersons"), the series *227* of the mid-1980s developed a multidimensional, black female television presences (Dates &Barlow, 1990). *227* was the brain child of Marla Gibbs who would not only be the series' star but also its creative consultant with a say over the story lines, characters and dialogue (Bogle, 2001). Marla played Mary, an urban apartment house tenant, whose husband and child formed a background for many of the show's plots (Dates & Barlow, 1990). Mary spent much of her time with her neighbors: Pearl (Helen Martin), an older woman who usually sat perched in her window, spying on the neighborhood; Rose (Alaina Reed-Hall), the landlord of the building, who, might be expected, had man problems; and Sandra Clark (Jackee Harry), a man crazed voluptuary hoping to snag a guy with big bucks (Bogle, 2001).

The sitcom *Amen* starring Sherman Hemsley formerly George Jefferson of *The Jeffersons* aired from 1986-1991. Set in Philadelphia, *Amen* centered on the activities of

Deacon Ernest Frye, his daughter Thelma (Anna Maria Horsford), and their friends and associates at the First Community Church (Bogle, 2001). This series projected a sense of family and community. Deacon Frye was a lawyer some would think he would have been a sophisticated African American character, however he bopped and hopped, as he shouted and threw tantrums (Bogle, 2001). Frye look as if he knew as much about the law (or had common sense) as Calhoun on *Amos 'n' Andy*. Frye's daughter Thelma was even outrageous. Thelma like Sandra (*227*), seemed to suffer from arrested development and was almost as man-hungry (Bogle, 2001).

A Different Word a spin off of *The Cosby Show* premiered in the fall of 1987 (Dates & Barlow, 1990). Created and produced by Carsey-Warner Productions in cooperation with Bill Cosby, it originally featured Lisa Bonet, a young woman who had played one of Cosby's daughters in the series *The Cosby Show*. Set in a historically black college atmosphere, the series developed the sparkling, bright-eyed talents of college-age youngsters in an ensemble format (Dates & Barlow, 1990). It was firmly rooted in Black culture thanks to its historically Black college setting, Hillman (Coleman, 2000). It featured a co-ed cast of characters representing a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, there was ample room to engage a multitude of economic, class-based, educative, personal, romantic, familial, employment, among other situations from a variety of sociocultural vantage points as they intersect and/or were informed by varying Black cultural experiences (Coleman, 2000). Robin Coleman (2000) considers *A Different World* as a rare "ideal" Black sitcom. This comedy show had social relevancy, an uncompromising construction of Blackness (Whiteness was not the normative yardstick), and the ability to use the situation comedy formula as a vehicle to highlight (not hide or

delete) the "Black experience" in America (Coleman, 2000). The show found its way to the list of top ten primetime television programs during the first part of the 1987-88 seasons (Dates & Barlow, 1990).

Frank's Place part comedy and part drama tagged "dramedy" by the critics was an examination of culture relationships (Bogle, 2001). *Frank's Place* carried African American images in a new directions and it starred Time Reid as a Black college professor who inherits a restaurant in New Orleans (Bogle, 2001). Co-produced and starring Tim Reid *Frank's Place* afforded Americans the opportunity to witness disequilibrium invade Frank's life, Frank had to decide whether to either return to his job as educator, or stay to operate his father's restaurant (Coleman, 2000). Every episode opened with the voice of Louis Armstrong on the soundtrack singing "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?" (Bogle, 2001). *Frank's Place* aired for only a single season; however, it provided an important exemplary lesson on how to represent the complexities of Black America without measuring it against Whiteness (Coleman, 2000). It was the intersection of two Black experiences: the first, the educated, upper-crust from the north versus the second, the culturally savvy working-class from the colorful Deep South New Orleans community (its food, language, music, religion) that evoked the greatest interest and carried the show (Coleman, 2000).

Robin Coleman (2000) explains, that *Frank's Place* was "dramedy," meaning that its comedy was interspersed with serious, reflective moments (Coleman, 2000). Dramedy, as employed in *Frank's Place*, finally permitted the social relevancy discourse that Lear had used so effectively in series such as *Maude* and *Mary Hartman*, but abandoned with shows like *The Jefferson* (Coleman, 2000). *Frank's Place* did not have

the crossover appeal its creator had hoped. *Franks Place* was nothing like Black situation comedies to date (Coleman, 2000). Coleman (2000) is of the opinion that *Frank's Place* failed to make clear that the innovative exploration of cultural difference was unacceptable for the mainstream and that the highly comedic, less threatening-hence, minimal social commentary, familiar, traditional stereotypical characterizations of Blackness- was not only more popular with mainstream viewers, but was the formula that was preferred (Coleman, 2000). The series began in 1987 and ended in 1988.

American Broadcasting Company a had a very long running series, *Family Matters* that began (1989-1998) as a harmless docome with messages of responsibility, loyalty, abstinence, honesty, and the value of family and education (Coleman, 2000). However, the show was soon criticized for redirecting its focus on the foolish, extremely nerdy Urkel and his look a like character Myrtle Urkel and Stefan Urquell. Donald Bogle (2001) argues, that Urkel was deracialized; a clownish geek who wasn't depicted any differently from your generic bookworm in the minds of others, is what made Urkel unique for a Black teenage male character was that he was something of an intellectual (Bogle, 2001). The president of the Beverly Hills/Hollywood NAACP found him refreshing because he revealed the diversity within the African American community (Bogle, 2001). Psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint commented, "He's not up on street talk, not a dancing, bopping kind of kid. The fact that he's a nerd and very bright may be a step forward –accepting that a Black kid can be bright and precocious and might end up in an Ivy League school" (Bogle, 2001). However, critic John J. O'Connor went so far as to write that Urkel's "broadly caricatured antics uneasily smack of a modern Stepin Fetchit in the making" (Bogle, 2001).

The Cosby Show

The Cosby Era: critics partly due to the success of The Cosby Show period note Diversity and Family, Cosby Decade, or The Age of Cosby. The Cosby Show is distinguished by (1) increased Black situation comedy programming, (2) in some cases, notably improved depictions of African Americans and the Black nuclear family, (3) the contributions of African American image makers, and (4) the marked popularity or "mainstreaming" (as cited by Nelson, 1996; Coleman, 2000). The Cosby Show aired from 1984 to 1992 and is credited with revolutionizing the Black situation comedy genre during this time by setting a standard for non-ridicule, by recognizing and celebrating Black culture, and by presenting African Americans as ably negotiating mainstream America, and with equal status (Coleman, 2000). This would be the first show of its kind that was totally governing sensibility the absolute first and last word on just about every detail- lay in black hands (Bogle, 2001). Bill Cosby would be the lead actor but also the show's co-creator, co-producer, and executive consultant (Bogle, 2001). Cosby scrutinized all scripts and no script got by without his approval (Bogle, 2001).

The Cosby Show featured Bill Cosby as Heathcliff Huxtable an obstetrician and wife Clair Huxtable played by Phylicia Rashad as a lawyer. The series focused on the familial trials the Huxtables encountered in a household of five children (Coleman, 2000). Trading in the sitcoms about single parents raising children along. No divorced or single parents, no bickering or rude children, and no demeaning racial stereotypes for the Huxtables (Coleman, 2000). With the exception of *The Cosby Show*'s enormous popularity, any resemblance to *Amos 'n' Andy* was nonexistent, as the Sambo characterization that the NAACP opposed vehemently in the 1950s was almost

eliminated entirely (Nelson, 1996as cited by Coleman, 2000). *The Cosby Show* depicted an assimilated upper-middle-class African American traditional family that was absent of any dysfunction, deviance, or deficiency (Coleman, 2000). Cosby's goal was to avoid negative images, Cosby hired African American psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint as a consultant to read every script (Bogle, 2001). Poussaint's job was to review scripts for negative stereotypes and any thing less than positive was removed or dropped altogether (Bogle, 2000). Cosby hired several other African Americans directors to help direct the show.

The Cosby Show was successful in part, because the Huxtables were virtually perfect, depicted as upper middle class, culturally centered, without stereotypes, achieving-if not surpassing- the "American Dream" (even White middle-class viewers envied the Huxtable lifestyle), hard working, intelligent, and with middle-class normative values (Coleman, 2000). For both Blacks and Whites, this was anew, never seen before image of Blackness (Coleman, 2000). There were references to black culture, paintings by African American artists on the walls in the Huxtable's home and office, and a general attitude that focused on comic perceptions about the universality of the human condition seen within the framework of a strong, proud, African American, upper middle-class family. For Blacks viewers and critics alike, this representation of the Black upper middle class prompted scrutiny and criticism (Coleman, 2000).

Critics complained that *The Cosby Show* was too soft and safe. By depicting this model affluent Black family, some argued, the show ignored the effects of institutionalized racism and alleviated white fears and guilt about social and political problems facing may African Americans (Bogle, 2001). Two professors at the University

of Massachusetts published a two-hundred-page study on the social effects of the show (Bogle, 2001). They argued if black people fail, then white people could look at the successful black people on *The Cosby Show* and say they only have themselves to blame (Bogle, 2001). *The Cosby Show* turned a blind eye to what Cosby called "racial foolishness" (as cited in Christon, 1989, Coleman, 2000). For some, *The Cosby Show* failed to adequately intersect being Black in America even while being a member of the Black middle class. With the exception of some overtly, well-positioned cultural signifiers- historically Black college/university paraphernalia, jazz albums, Black art, and naming the grandchildren Winnie and Nelson after the Mandela's racial discourse negated replaced with integrationist (rather than separate and equal) and assimilationist (a Black *Father Knows Best*) White middle-class values (Harris, 1997 as cited by Coleman, 2000).

Sitcoms in the 1990s

Robin Coleman describes the 1900's as the Neo-Minstrelsy period (2000); today's Black situation comedies are the same fervor and loathing that the "father" of sitcoms (*Amos 'n' Andy)* faced. Neo-Minstrelsy is defined by its Sambo, coon, Nat/bad buck, and prized criminals character types. It ridicules Black culture and promotes racial separation and inequality (Coleman, 2000). African Americans in these series operate in an all-Black world in which, rarely, does a member of another race enter. In Neo- minstrelsy black sitcoms, Whites see virtual non-recognition; however, this may be a good thing, since few individuals of any race, it would seem, would want to be part of some the environs offered during this period (Coleman, 2000). Neo-Minstrelsy, as a term describes the full circle that Black situation comedy has come in its treatment of

Blackness, explicitly acknowledging a renewed emphasis upon the ridicule and subordination of Black culture as homogeneously deviant.

During this period Black sitcom characters broke out in frenzied dancing more often with greater intensity. The blackvoice remained, laden with gross malapropisms. This era put emphasis on slang and the language of rap/hip-hop or "the ghetto" was popularized (Coleman, 2000). The voices seem louder, more shrill, and more bossy and sassy. Dialogue was often accentuated by ample finger snapping, eye rolling, neck swaying, and tongue clucking (Coleman, 2000). Physical comedy was more prevalent fight with objects such as paper, food, mops, floor polishers, wiring and cords, wigs, clothes, and nail buffers.

An all time high of over forty (and counting) Black sitcoms have aired on commercial, network television during the Neo- Minstrelsy period, according to Robin Coleman (2000). Many Black sitcoms surfaced in the 90's and then quickly disappeared. For example, *New Attitude* (1990), where a group of hairdressers, to include the real-life band The Time's lead singer Morris Day, bungled their way through life while displaying outrageous coifs and Sambo-inspired outfits (Coleman, 2000). There was also, the short lived sitcom *Sugar and Spice (*1990), a friendscom of sassy Black women, and the domcom You Take the Kids (1990-1991), set in inner-city Pittsburgh and starring the ever-motherly, opinionated Nell Carter (Coleman, 2000).

Coleman (2000) blames United Paramount Network (UPN), FOX Broadcasting Company (Fox), and Warner Brothers (WB) for the worst Black situation comedies of the 1990s. She does not leave the larger networks out of the loop either. In 1992 and 1993 CBS did not offer one Black sitcom, and very few thereafter, with two in 1996.

However, ABC did offer consistent Black comedy (surprisingly since it is not immediately thought of as targeting African Americans (Coleman, 2000). Hangin' with Mr. Cooper was one of ABC's mainstay black sitcoms, starring Mark Curry, as Mark, a professional basketball star turned high school teacher (Coleman, 2000). Shows like *Where I Live* (1993) starring Doug E. Doug, and bubble gum sitcom starring twin sisters Tia and Tamera Mowry, Tim Ried, and Jackee` Harry in *Sister Sister* (1994 –1995; and switch the WB). *Me and the Boys* (1994-1995) were credited for its positive depiction of an African American male as hard working, loving, non-criminal, and family centered.

National Broadcasting Company neglected to offer new series staring African Americans in 1993. It put only two Black situation comedies on its 1996 lineup. The *Fresh Prince of Bel Air (*1990-1996), a Black situation comedy (Coleman, 2000). Will Smith, rapper turned actor starred as the show's lead character, Will from Philadelphia, "hooded out" in hip/hop attire spitting "black street slang" on the set. Coleman claims that through Will, the Black community was largely dysfunctional, replete with deviance in the form of gangs, absentee fathers, and criminals. Coleman (2000) argues, that the Fresh Prince was a contemporary Minstrelsy due to traditional, stereotypical coon antics (it is Carlton who often scoots across the floor), depictions of moral and social deviance, and its reliance upon blackvoice.

Most of the major networks assumed that Black programming was the kiss of death, the upstarts capitalized on it. United Paramount Network (UPN) aired such series as *Moesha, Malcolm & Eddie, Sparks, Good Behavior, Homeboys in Outer Space, Good News, and Between Brothers*. When NBC dropped the sitcom *In the House*, UPN picked it up (Bogle, 2001). Just as other networks had capitalized on Black sitcoms several

decades before UPN did the same with the same old negative stereotypes. For example UPN's Homeboys in Outer Space (1996-1997) sent two "comic Negroes" into futuristic outer space (Coleman, 2000). Darryl Bell, formerly of *A Different World*, starred as Morris Clay, and Felex was Tyberious "Ty" Walker (Coleman, 2000). The premise was that these two twenty-third-century cargo haulers would shuttle around space in the Hoopty, a junker of a spaceship, and get into impossible situations like when they were held captive by a colony of nubile woman (Coleman, 2000).

UPN would not be the only network to ripe the benefits of urban comedy, the WB (Warner Brothers) capitalized on black urban sitcoms as well. WB's series included *The Wayans Brothers* that aired in 1995. The series focused on the pickles each brother gets in and the hilarity that comes with the two striving for a return to equilibrium (Coleman, 2000). Bogle (2001) claims, that the Wayans Bros. was really dumb and dumber. The series prized the criminal, the use of blackvoice, coon antics and was popular with teens (Coleman, 2000). *The Jamie Foxx Show* was also featured on the WB in 1996. The star of the show, a stand-up comedian Jamie Foxx, happened to make his show the network's most popular comedy (Coleman, 2000). Foxx's comedy often consists of impersonations of famous African American figures (e.g., Jesse Jackson) that frequently moved from parody to vulgar aping (Coleman, 2000).

While NBC had 14 percent more white households tuning in than Black ones, UPN drew 52 percent more African American households than withes (Bogle, 2001). Fox had 105 percent more Black homes the WB network had an astounding 586 percent higher Black viewers (Bogle, 2001). So, it was no shock when *The Steve Harvey Show* was the number one program for Black viewers (Bogle, 2001). Comedian Steve Harvey

played Steve Hightower, a former lead singer in a soul group, who becomes a high school music teacher in Chicago (Bogle, 2001). The show starred a predominately all black cast with the exception of two cast members: Regina (Wendy Raquel Robinson), Cedric (Cedric "The Entertainer"), Lovita (Terri J. Vaughn), Romeo (Merlin Santana), and the two important white characters, Bullethead and Lydia were often the silliest in the cast but very appealing (Bogle, 2001). Steve (Steve Harvey) often spoke with a rhythmic use of Black vernacular and a clear cultural sign and according to Bogle (2001), one is grateful that he doesn't teach English. *The Steve Harvey Show* was successful with Black audiences, most white viewers didn't even know of its existence.

Living Single a show centered around four black women who were friends sharing a brownstone in New York together and the men in their lives. The show starred hip hop star Queen Latifah, former *Facts Of Life* star Kim Fields, former *Cosby Show* star Erika Alexander and comedian Kim Coles. *Living Single* aired in 1993 on FOX and was cancelled in 1998 (Coleman, 2000). The series revolved around the six young, intelligent (and yes, street savvy) professional up-and-comers, and their friendship, professional, and romantic relationships (Coleman, 2000).

Robin Coleman (2000) believes, that *Living Single* portrayal of Blackness did have its high points, such as its entrepreneurial focus through the star Khadijah, played by rapper Queen Latifah. Khadijah was the owner and editor of a slick urban magazine called Flavor that monitored hip-hop culture (Coleman, 2000). The characters were accomplished in their career endeavors and remained rooted in the inner city Black community (Coleman, 2000). The show showcased Black independent women. Disliked was the series' reliance upon the same traditional White stereotypes of Blacks such as the

use of blackvoice (what the characters egregiously call "Ebonics"), the use of ridicule in dealing with Black women (Regine is too mocked about her "horse hair" in Martin fashion), and the presence of Oriole and Jim Crow character types in the dimwit Synclaire and bumpkin Overton (Coleman, 2000).

FOX hit it big when it adopted the hit series *Martin* (1992-1997). Martin Lawrence, a stand-up-comedian and host of Def Comedy Jam won his own comedy show in 1992. The original premise of the show was dubbed a "comedy romance show" by FOX but soon turned into a coon clowning show. The show took place in Philadelphia and revolved around radio deejay Martin Payne and his girlfriend, Gina Waters (Tisha Campbell) (Zook, 1999). Some critics believe that *Martin* was the first to feature a young, professional black couple in love, and were understandably pleased to see such a rare representation on prime-time television (Zook, 1999).

Martin Lawrence's sitcom *Martin* appealed to 18 to 49-year-old viewers (Bogle, 2001). *Martin* ranked in the top five among viewers 12 to 17 and in the top ten with ages 2 to 11 (Bogle, 2001). In 1997 the series was the third most watch show by African Americans (Bogle, 2001). In addition, to exploring the relationships of a young couple it also explored relationships among friends, done with a hip-hop beat and rhythm (Bogle, 2001). It also set out to comically dramatize the rather traditional sexual/gender attitudes of a young African American male. However, the show turned into a Black male constantly clowning, oversexed male chauvinist. *Martin* carried all those old stereotypes from *Amos 'n' Andy*. For example, Martin's friend Cole, with his over-sized clothes and his large hats, seemed so dim-witted that one wondered how he survived in the world. Certainly, he didn't look as if he could function in any workplace; one sign that Black

males had nothing to contribute establishment culture (Bogle, 2001). On the other hand, Tommy appeared ad if he might be on the ball; certainly he wasn't childlike like Cole and certainly he had more common sense than Martin. But no one was sure where Tommy worked, or if he worked at all. It was as bad as the situation with Kingfish (Bogle, 2001).

Robin Coleman (2000), believes that the sitcom *Martin* was vilified for its derisive stereotyping Blacks. On *Martin*, Martin was so antagonistic to women, the series was largely misogynistic (Coleman, 2000; Zook, 1999). For example, in full view of young White viewers (the series' primary audience), Martin belittles not only Black women but also cultural signifiers at times attributed to Black females. Pam was continuously heckled by Martin for donning "horse hair," was called "beady bead" when her relaxed hair reverted to its naturally curly state, and was thus for her "nappy, ergo, unfavorable hair" (as cited in Means 1994b,p., Coleman, 2000). On the whole Martin drew on one dimensional, limited character types like Mama Payne, Roscoe the snot nosed kid hustler, Sheneneh the B-Girl from around the way, and Jerome the "original gangster," that added up to little more than street-smart buffoons (as cited in Farley, 1993, Coleman, 2000). According to Martin's definition of Blackness, the brutal buck, shucking and jiving Sambos, feisty, hot-tempered Sapphires, and simpleton coons represented the scope of African Americans

New Millennium Black Sitcoms

Though times have changed, African American actors and actress are still limited to mostly sitcoms. As a result, black comedies are shown on Mondays and Fridays; and those six or seven shows that account for the majority of black characters on television or shown on UPN. Monday and Friday are "black" primetime and account for more than

half of all African Americans characters in primetime at 52.2 percent (Hunt, 1999; Jet, 2003). Hunt's African American Television Report concluded that UPN ranks as the second least watched network after the WB. Blacks account for 28 percent of all characters on the network and 37 percent of series (Hunt, 1999).

According to a UCLA study, African Americans and Anglo Americans represented 92 percent of all prime-time characters in the study, yet they comprise 82 percent of the nation's population (UCLA, 2002). The research titled "Prime Time in Black and White: Making Sense of the 2001 Fall Season, " was based on a content analysis of 224 episodes of 85 fictional series, which aired on ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, UPN and WB in October and November 2001 (UCLA, 2002). It is the inaugural report of a five year study that will track the on-screen presence of black Americans in prime time network television and issues pertaining to behind-the-scenes control (UCLA, 2002). Darnell Hunt the study's author and director was also the author of a Screen Authors Guild study 2000 with similar findings (UCLA, 2002).

Darnell Hunt found that African Americans on television are "ghettoized" (UCLA, 2002). Meaning they are more likely than other ethnic groups to appear on situation comedies. The researcher concluded that African Americans were concentrated on UPN and appeared mostly on Monday and Saturday nights (UCLA, 2002). They represented 28 percent of the characters on UPN compared to about 12 percent on other networks (UCLA, 2002). Thirty-seven percent of series regulars on UPN were African Americans; and fifty-two percent of all African American characters that appeared on the screen for more then 10 minutes per hour of programming were on UPN (UCLA, 2002). CBS was the network with the second-largest percentage of all African American

characters, or 17 percent. In the 2000 report, which was based on the 1999 fall television season, African Americans were more concentrated on UPN and the WB.

The study also examined whether African Americans were stereotyped by occupation and the degree to which black life is integrated into mainstream society (UCLA, 2002). Black characters were not stereotyped by occupation. Nevertheless, about 30 percent of black characters had occupations that were not clear from the sampled episodes in the study (UCLA, 2002). Though blacks were represented in primetime there were few images of life inside the African American home (UCLA, 2002).

For the first time since the early 1990s, when NBC's *The Cosby Show* and *Fresh Prince of Bel* Air enjoyed mainstream success, two new sitcoms starring African Americans have crossed racial lines as broad based hits in 2001 (Freeman, 2001). ABC's *My Wife and Kids* won slot time, and Fox's *The Bernie Mach Show* premiered Nov. 14, 2001 with a double run that won the first half-hour among adults 18 to 49 and improved 4 percent on its lead-in for the second half-hour (Freeman, 2001). My Wife and Kids averaged a 10.7 rating among black adults 18 to 49 while turning in a 4.5 rating among white adults 18 to 49 (Freeman, 2001). African American viewers made up 11 percent of the TV universe (Freeman, 2001).

Research shows UPN is making an effort to characterize African Americans accurately with shows like "*One-on-One*" and "*Girlfriend*". UPN dedicated a series of shows to the HIV/AIDS awareness campaign sponsored by Viacom and the health information/research company the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (Jet, 2003). It is vital to reflect all African Americans in a positive and realistic way, to encourage cultural

differences and respect them. There are sitcoms on television today that try and bring realistic African Americans issues to the table. For example, "*Girlfriends*" provides an open, honest exploration of the hot button issues about family, friends, relationships and life facing black and white women today. They even address interracial dating. With fearlessness and sincerity, the show takes on universal issues that appeal to all women. Whether it's as trivial as dating a man who is a sex addict, or as serious as facing the consequences of taking Ecstasy, "*Girlfriends*" treats them all with tenderness, care and respect.

African Americans are continuing to break down barriers in the media. Black sitcoms characters are expanding as they relate to the story line. Black actors and actresses are performing in positive roles on today's black sitcoms, as far as occupations are concerned. African Americans can been seen as doctors, lawyers, producers, realtors, TV anchors, and entrepreneurs, once only performing as maids, servants, Uncle Toms, coons and clowns. UPN is making a change to deliver more diverse distribution, which will possibly help to reduce negative stereotypes about African Americans. Shows like *Half and Half* does this without the head bobbing and finger wagging that have become overworked stereotypes on too many comedies with black women characters. There is universality in its theme of split families seeking some sort of reunion. But there also is a welcome specificity in the way it gently explores two different aspects of the African-American experience. In 2003 UPN added one new sitcom to its line-up. Eve, starring the Hip-Hop singer as a dress designer navigating the rock waters of the dating scene (Handleman, 2003). It is a multi-ethnic variation on "Sex and the City," and while it offers a few chuckles, it lacks the spark or originality that made the HBO show so

surprisingly funny (Handleman, 2003). To add diversity to their network in 2003 UPN add The *Mullets* and *Rock Me Baby*, however both were cancelled in the same year. The push for diversity on several networks paid off in 2003. NBC picked up *Whoopi*, *The Tracy Morgan Show* midseason, and the WB's fall slate consisted *All About the Andersons* and *Like family*, five of the six broadcast networks starred African Americans in leading roles (Frutkin, 2003). All four sitcoms were cancelled after their first season.

Black Women in Sitcoms

African American women are sometimes still being portrayed as the mammy/Sapphire or "mamma," exploited through hyper-racial humor and racist regime representation. Susan J. Douglas the author of her 1994 book, *Where the Girls Are* takes particular exception to the loud, matriarchal Black female characterization of the 1970s. Douglas explains, that Black women began to get roles, but most often as oversized, forbidding matriarchs whose dialogue consisted primarily of yelling at men and ridiculing their husbands. Black female characters in the early 1970s fell into… the stereotype of the hefty, a-sexual, loud-mouthed, castrating, domineering woman. Black sitcoms never neglected to stigmatize African American women. A prime example of a loud mouth, shrewd, and witty black woman in a Black sitcom is LaWanda Page's character Aunt Esther in the 1970's hit comedy *Sanford and Son*. Aunt Esther could be constantly seen shucking and jiving with Redd Foxx as Fred Sanford. Fred Sanford's arguments with Aunt Esther were the loudest and most cantankerous verbal slugfests since the days of Kingfish and Sapphire (Bogle, 2001). Donald Bogle emphasized (2001), that Aunt Esther was one more in a lineup of old-style hootin' and hollerin' desexed mammy-like figures, battling a triflin' Black male.

Esther Rolle played a maid in the sitcom *Maude*. As many actress before her, Rolle played an outspoken and clever (Bogle, 2001) maid. Theresa Merritt was cast as the mother in the sitcom *That's My Mamma*, because she was large, fulsome, and brown skinned, she fit the physical image of the acceptable, nurturing, seemingly sexless Black television mother (Bogle, 2001). The women in *What's Happening*!, were the most cartoonish of the characters with the camera angles spotlighting their weight and the dialogue emphasizing their sassiness (Bogle, 2001). Weighing well over two hundred pounds and depicted as a no-nonsense matriarch, Mabel King's Mama Thomas was one more slightly updated overstuffed mammy (Bogle, 2001). The same was true of the foul-tongued waitress Shirley, who looked ever ready for a fight (Bogle, 2001). Dee Raj's sister was even sassy, seemed as if she was a young mammy in waiting (Bogle, 2001). *What's Happening!*, made female assertiveness and independence look like something out of a nightmare (Bogle, 2001). The women were horrific harridans- ball busing control freaks- to be avoided at all costs (Bogle, 2001).

A decade later we would see these same stereotypes in *Gimme a Break!* Nell Carter playing Nell Harper a robust in stature, sassy, loud-mouth taking care of a motherless White family (Coleman, 2000). Nell was a mammy figure in her role and it was further problematized by the abject rejection of Blackness (Dates & Barlow, 1990; Coleman, 2000). Loud, bossy, and "in charge" from the moment each episode began, Nell's own ethical code was juxtaposed to a wide amoral streak that allowed here to lie and cheat when it suited her purpose, as the audience roared with laughter (Dates &Barlow, 1990).

If Black women were not playing loud-mouth-witty maids they could be seen in the shadows in early days of Black sitcoms. For example, Thelma played by Bernadette Stanis in the sitcom *Good Times*, would often exchange barbs but mainly her role was to react, not initiate much. The scripts called for her to stand around, looking sweet and vaguely yearning for something else (Bogle, 2001). The writers showed no interest in sensitively developing her as a young African American teenager on the brink of womanhood (Bogle, 2001). The most interesting character female character on *Good Times* was a Ja'net DuBois's character Willona (Bogle, 2001). Known for her racy, spicy way with the most banal lines: "Make my coffee like I like my men. Hot. Black. And Strong." (Bogle, 2001) According to Donald Bogle (2001), she didn't work because she wanted a fabulous career or she worked partly because she enjoyed it partly because she had to. Dates and Barlow (1990), view Willona as good-hearted, representative of the low-class figure with a contradictive image. Viewers were never quite sure whether she was a swinger or a middle-class striver fallen on bad times who was forced to live in "the projects." But, like most African American female characters in sitcoms she was finger-snapping sister.

Jackee Harry played Sandra Clark on hit comedy *227* and was perceived as a man crazed single woman. Often she spoke baby talk, like a little girl pleading with Mommy and Daddy for a lollipop (Bogle, 2001). When she walked, she was the full figured girl with the rotary hips, who worked them overtime (Bogle, 2001). When she dressed, the tighter the sweater, the better (Bogle, 2001). In a world where women had only so much power, Jackee's character Sandra employed to the max that age-old notion of woman's sexuality as her source of empowerment. Some African American women

identified with her body language and body definition (Bogle, 2001). Sandra had full hips and breasts, which she proudly displayed for the perusal of any interested party (Bogle, 2001).

America had seen black women in sitcoms behave as loudmouth mammies, but few had seen a Black American Princess (BAP) until *A Different World's* Whitley Gilbert played by Jasmine Guy. A Black Southern Bell known to be vain, selfish, good-looking, sexy, demanding, and so confident that she felt superior to just about everyone around her unless that woman were white (Bogle, 2001). The character Whitley was self-absorbed; Jasmine Guy created an assured, hincty, high- yeller bitch goddess that African Americans were all to familiar with and which white viewers probably never knew existed (Bogle, 2001). Whitley was apt representation of a social system television had never before acknowledged; she was a member of the old Southern Black aristocracy, those light-skilled, straight-haired African Americans who too pride in their accomplishments, their lineage, and their climb up the social ladder (Bogle, 2001). Whitley Gilbert would not be the only BAP Americans would see in Black sitcoms. Hilary the cousin of Will on the *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* was a spoil rich kid and dumbbell (Oriole), as well as a BAP (Coleman, 2000).

In the 1990s women were constantly being characterized like their predecessor Sapphire, in *Sugar and Spice* the women where boisterous and witty, as well as the characters in the sitcom *You Take the Kids*; these two sitcoms did nothing to erase the Black culture signifiers (Coleman, 2000). *Living Single* did its part to truly and erase those old signifiers, but from time to time, would fall back on them to deliver punch lines. Though *Living Single* had its positive highlights some critics found negative

stereotypes to complain about. Though all the roommates have college degrees and upscale jobs," wrote Harry Waters in *Newsweek*, "they behave like man-crazy Fly Girls" (Bogle, 2001). Others complained that the characters were blatant gender stereotypes (Bogle, 2001). Like her predecessor Sandra on *227*, Kim Field's Regine was forever on the prowl for a man with money (Bogle, 2001). Synclaire was a ditzy reminder of Marilyn Monroe, part Marie Wilson on TV's *My Friend Irma* and *Three's Company's* Suzanne Somers. The character Maxine played by Erika Alexander's seem to break the past molds, a divorce attorney, she was smart, shrewd and articulate (Bogle, 2001). She happens to be a foodaholic, gobbling up just about anything in sight as an attempt to be a "lovable" idiosyncrasies character (Bogle, 2001).

Gina, Martin Payne's girlfriend in the sitcom *Martin,* started out as a businesswoman, however later the character was developed as shrill similar to Oriole (*Amos 'n' Andy*) incompetent who was rarely seen working (Coleman, 2000). In addition Pam, Gina's best friend, a sharp-tongued Sapphire characterized as always ready to lash out at anyone standing in her path. Though the sitcom had its flaws it also had its positives. Gina, Martin's girlfriend and later on wife, is a successful marketing executive who is able to move between both worlds using Standard English when necessary and using African American Vernacular English when relaxing with family and friends. Pam Gina's best friend is also a successful marketing executive at a large marketing firm (Bogle, 2001).

Donald Bogle author of Primetime Blues (2001), explains that the comedy series *Martin* was immersed in turning characters like Sheneneh and other women into grotesque figures; objects of tawdry jokes and scorn. Sheneneh with extensions, her eyes

pops, her competitive attitude toward Gina and other women, Sheneneh was ribald parody of a pushy, know-it-all, forever attitudinizing, desperately trying-to-be- hip, and always-in-your-face young urban Black woman sometimes refer to as a ghetto "homegirl" in the urban communities (Zook, 1999).

Though black women have been portrayed as loud mouths from time to time in Black comedies, Black women also have used their intellect to out wit their opponents. For example, Sapphire Kingfish's wife on the sitcom Amos 'n' Andy used reason and intellect to see through husband's clownish charades (Bogle, 2001). Here, of course, the series fell in line with traditional movie/radio images of Black women (in the past, usually those divested of their sexuality) as industrious and productive; and of Black men as lacking the skills and drive to function in the larger society. Yet the women sometimes mark something new, mainly because they articulated their feelings about a class system in the African American community.

Social Learning Theory

Non-African Americans who watch black sitcoms buy into the stereotypes presented to them and could possibly believe that all African Americans behave and speak in the same manner. Research shows that the social learning theory proposes that African Americans learn negative self-images from negative television programming. If this is true for African Americans this should also be true of non- African Americans. Children observing programs, which feature people of a particular ethnicity, or portray certain ethnic groups in a consistently stereotypical way, will reinforce negative behaviors in children toward particular racial groups or contribute to problems with self-perception . Dorr's research found that children learned social attitudes toward other

racial groups, their own racial groups and themselves by example. Reciprocal determinism if used effectively in television may be used as an advantage in changing behavior and attitudes by not focusing on behavior in isolation but focusing instead on changes in environment and the individual. Though the research is based on small children these small children will soon be adults. Assuming these small children are non-African Americans and if they are never exposed to African Americans outside of the television until adulthood they may modify their behavior or language to accommodate what they believe to be true about African Americans when interacting with them.

African Americans on television have commonly been characterized as singers, dancers, maids, servants and buffoons (Hunt, 1999). Dates and Barlow (1990), argued that televised comedies help America adjust to the social order and in their portrayal of African American images, these comedies pick up threads of the established pattern of white superiority and Black servitude and continue to weave them back into the popular culture. In the past, shows like *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times*, condemn Blacks with its language and the characters' physical appearance. However, "*The Cosby Show*" portrayed an upper middle class set of parents and children who represented family life in the broader society. "*The Cosby Show*" made references to Black Culture, showed paintings by African American artists and provided a general attitude that focused on the human condition seen within the framework of a strong, proud African American (Dates and Barlow, 1990, Ebony Magazine 1983). It is important that all Americans see African Americans in different settings to reduced stereotypes on television, especial other African Americans.

Negative Stereotypes

Stereotype is defined by Coleman (2000) as a conventional formulaic, oversimplified conception opinion. It promotes an unvarying pattern of a group that has come to be associated with negative portrayals. Himmelstein the author of the 1984 book Television Myth and the American Mind, distinguishes stereotypes as inaccurate popular concepts that are applied indiscriminately to individuals without regard for those individuals actual characteristics (Coleman, 2000). Stereotype is our entrance into understanding how the African American race is dealt with on television and why, or to what ideological and power-laden end are stereotypes so have relied upon for Blacks (Coleman, 2000). Once inside the characterization, we will find that stereotype is jus one part of a "regime of racial representations" that confines African Americans (Coleman, 2000).

Allport (1958) produced a seminal work with his *The Nature of Prejudice* and he explains that stereotypes are often totally unsupported by facts; others develop from a sharpening and overgeneralization of facts (p. 186). Allport (1958) uses a survey in which participants produce a list of stereotypes associated with the Negro. The list is a who's who list of mammies, toms, coons, and brutal bucks popular culture stereotypes. The caveat is that these traits were assigned to "real" Negroes or African Americans. The list, in part includes: inferior mentality, primitive morality, over assertiveness, lazy and boisterous, gaudy and flashy dress, given to crimes of violence with razors and knives and occupational unstable (p.192). Allport determined that White America's ideologies about African Americans are false: "We hear that they are lazy and inert, but also aggressive and pushing." However, in the South one sometimes hears that there is "no

race problem" because the Negro knows his place and stays in it; but in the next breath, that force is needed in order to keep Negro there (p.193). By defining African Americans stereotypically and advancing the negative stereotypes as within the regime of truth," Black culture is disemboweled as Whiteness is set apart as better, and thereby, more powerful and dominant (Coleman, 2000). Robin Coleman (2000), uses Berry Gordon's "Television and Afro-Americans: Past Legacy and Present Portrayals to her define black stereotypes. Gordon revealed six stereotypical myths confound notions of African Americans worth and legitimacy in society: (1) the Black household headed by a single parent, most often the mother (e.g., Thea and South Central); (2) the domineering, overly aggressive Black woman, such as "Aunt Esther" from *Sanford and Son*; (3) the use of Black dialect (really, a caricature of black English resulting in blackvoice; (4) the Black community as weak and destructive (e.g., the ghetto poor); (5) idolizing pimps, drug dealers, and other criminals as prized figures by the Black community (e.g., "Hustle Man" and "Jerome" of Martin); and (6) the African American and subsequently the Black community as a homogeneous, monolithic group.

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According to Robin Coleman (2000), street-style, ghetto centric characterizations give today's Black sitcom viewers the same impression that Blacks appearing blackface did, that somehow Black stereotypes were more authentic because it could be argued they came from Black culture. The presence of these new stereotypes has the potential to confuse non-Blacks who lack exposure to Black culture and/or use media presentations to complete their definitions of Blackness (Coleman, 2000). For example, for those who use the word "nigger" and do not understand the pain behind it.

Black Language

The television is the gateway to diversity. In sitcoms African Americans are constantly using Black English sometimes referred to as Ebonics to deliver punch lines. Scholars did not approve of the term Black English so they chose Ebonics. Ebonics refers to a mixture of European and African languages born of the African American slave trade (Baugh, 2000; Smitherman, 2000). John Baugh author of Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice opens his foreword by asking, "Why now a book on Ebonics? Hasn't uproar about Ebonics come and gone, a flash in the pan? Yes, but the flash illuminated something in our lives that is still with us, entanglement of preconceptions about language, race, and fairness that does not go away, that continues to bedevil education and public life." Baugh (2000) explains, that the linguistic consequences of the

African slave trade have been greatly misunderstood, due in part to the social, scholarly, and educational devaluation of linguistic influences and speech that resulted from slavery. Many people face linguistic dexterity and racial bigotry simple because the outsider of their language does not understand it. Not only is the outsider confused there are African Americans who are confused as well. Ebonics is a complex language and the word itself has multiple meanings. Baugh (2000), identifies the confusion Afrocentric literature purports and supports Ebonics; others resulted from detractors of Ebonics, who equated it with "slang," or "broken inner-city English," "bad English," or worse. In contrast Standard English has been defined as that which is deemed acceptable by the prestigious social class in society (Seymour & Seymour, 1979).

Antonio Brown opts to use Black Speech acts instead of Ebonics. Antonio Brown (2002) author of the article Performing "truth"; Black speech acts explains, that the form of "truth" is asserted by the invocation of Black Speak is a language that resonates "truth" and is based in the sense of community evoked by and attributed to the cultural/communicative. Black Speak communicates a "truth" by infusing its message with the linguistic style that formulates and informs cultural identities and communities (Brown, 2002). Slavery, subjugation and discrimination cultivated Black Speak (and a Black consciousness) that delves for a "truth" beneath the surface of standardized, legitimized mainstream culture (Brown, 2002). "Truth" resonates from the shared social identity and heritage that permeate and necessitate the construction of Black Speak, linking its interlocutors to the socially constructed and historically transmitted patterns of meaning that define culture (Brown, 2002).

Multiple experiences have constructed a combination of communal and private spaces in which Black Speak has become encoded by what Henry Louis Gates calls an authenticated sign of Blackness (Brown, 2002). These shared experiences imbue the conscious articulation of Black vernacular with "soulful" qualities, which resonate as the message is transmitted from the orator to the receiver (Brown, 2002). The invocation of Black Speak evokes a "meta-discourse" of discemable significations, connotations, and denotations that transcend the oratory and signals "true" communication. Black Speak is invoked to communicate clearly and concisely a "truth" to another or others who have shared the cultural history and who are conversant in the vernacular form (Brown, 2002). The purposeful invocation of the dialect and manipulation of standardized English suggest that the orator is in command of all the languages involved. For those individuals whose daily demands require a reliance on "mainstream," standardized speech acts, the purposeful invocation of Black Speak can be a powerful statement about identity, community, connectedness to the counter/alternative culture, and the oration as well as the perception of a "truth" (Brown, 2002).

Brown (2002) argues, that Black Speak moves beyond the study of Ebonics and its alleged pathologies, or even its legitimized predominance in segments of the African American community; but, Black Speak acknowledges the agency of the orator and affirms the role of cultural contexts and the interplay of linguistic structure and social structure that ensures that, as the agent adapts a language, she or he purposefully provides meaningful social signals. In other words, an individuals identities become recognized and acknowledged based on his or her language choices(Brown, 2002). The individual will link himself with values and belief system as he performs communicative acts

(Brown, 2002). The orator will use Black Speak and avert standardized speech patterns and adopt the counter-cultural. Speech acts will identify the individual with a community whose communication flows (at will) both with and against the tide of the mainstream (Brown, 2002). Black Speak is recognizable to, definable by, and inclusive of those conversant in the cultural/communicative form (Brown, 2002). It is a sociolinguistic form that resides among the artifacts of the shared history, heritage, and culture of Americans of African decent. More importantly, unlike the traditional perspectives on Black English, the purposeful invocation of Black Speak signals the intent to make (re)cognizable a "truth" (Brown, 2002). The significance of Black Speak is more readily observed when contextualized within a broader linguistic repertoire. That is, among multilingual orators it becomes clearer that the switching of communicative forms serves to delineate a "truth." Such codeswitching highlights the use of multiple linguistic forms in the course of a communicative act (Brown, 2002).

According to Harry N. Seymour and Charlena M. Seymour, authors of the article The Symbolism of Ebonics: I'd Rather Switch than Fight (1979), they declare that Blacks and Whites speakers are easily differentiated because of linguistic feature differences such as pitch inflections, syllable stress, sound patterns, and formation of questions, negation, possessives, relative clauses, tense markers, and the verb to be. The features of Ebonics are present in varying degrees among Ebonics speakers. One speaker may exhibit only a few of the features that mark a dialect as Ebonics, while another may have most of these features in their speech repertoire (Seymour & Seymour, 1979). The Seymours explain (1979), that linguistic variability among Black speakers may be accounted for by their different soicoeducational levels and also by a form of style-

switching (aka, code switching). The term style-switching refers to a speaker's alternative use of different styles of speaking (Seymour & Seymour, 1979). Style-switching may be exemplified by a person who uses Ebonics when talking to Black listeners, and Standard English when talking to white listeners (Seymour & Seymour, 1979). Switching is common to many speakers but particularly typical of Ebonics speakers because the circumstances under which they use style-switching depend on certain social variables that are rather unique to the Black experience (Seymour & Seymour, 1979).

The ability of one to style-switch between Mainstream American English and Ebonics depends on one's tacit knowledge of the linguistics rules of both varieties of English. The Seymours claim that knowledge varies among speakers of Ebonics because education and cultural influences greatly determine linguistic knowledge and performance. Those Black people whose educational experiences have not sufficiently exposed them to the use of MAE will not be effective style switchers. Black people who have spoken African American English almost exclusively and have been removed from the "Black experience" for many years may also have difficulty switching to Ebonics. At least three types of style switchers may be observed among adult Black speakers: (a) Black speakers who are uneducated and for that reason have difficulty using MAE; (b) Black speakers who are educated and able to speak MAE but have difficulty using Ebonics; and (c) Black speakers who are educated and are able to use both MAE and Ebonics.

The three types of style switchers have been seen in several sitcoms for example, Sheneneh from the hit comedy series *Martin* is an example of a black speaker who is

probably uneducated and would more than likely have a problem using MAE. Sheneneh's character is the hyper-racial essence of B-boys and girls (Coleman, 2000). According to Nelson, Black created character types are still influenced by White stereotypes and Sheneneh is loud and trashy, a personality trait presented as intrinsically linked to her class status (Coleman, 2000). She is fully in tune with the streets is necessarily violent for her ghetto environ, and is incapable of negotiating relationships with those less "B-ish"; the educated, the non-urban, those outside her culture, and the Black middle class or Buppies (Coleman, 2000).

A style-switcher is the Black speaker who is educated and has difficulty speaking Ebonics, for example, stereotypical "Buppies" or Black urban professionals representing the Black middle class (Coleman, 2000). Joseph C. Phillip played Denise Huxtable's husband a navel-officer on *The Cosby Show*, and is a prime example of black speaker who has difficulty speaking Ebonics. Robin Coleman (2000), refers to his character as a Buppie, a representative of contemporary Black assimilationism into White culture. Buppies are portrayed in sitcoms as conservative, humorless, uncomfortable with or repulsed by Blackness, devoid of the "looser," fun-loving Black style (Coleman, 2000). Buppies are also seen as ambitious, they savor pursing and achieving the normative standard of the materialistic American Dream, and they are seen as unopposed to integration efforts and moving toward the White, middle-class center (Coleman, 2000). Theses Buppies are often presented as out of touch with their roots or disconnected from "real" Black culture and have to be reoriented to Blackness by a more valued, freer-style-B-boy or girl. Americans saw these types of characters in the *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* Carlton Banks (Buppie) and Will Smith (B-Boy). The problem with this characterization

is that if Buppies are depicted as not born of the rap/hip-hop notion of the "street," Blackness is called into question (Coleman, 2000).

Language represents society's theory of reality (Smitherman, 2000). The sociolinguist construction of reality in the class system of the United States is made more complex by the contradiction black and white English, which are the same, and not the same. White English (aka standard English) that language spoken by power elites and those who aspire to upward social mobility; non-standard English is that language spoken by working-class whites; Black English is that language spoken by African Americans. White English and Standard English are class dialects in US society, Black English, by contrast, is racial dialect within the class system. That is, Black English is spoken across the class spectrum among African Americans; middle class blacks develop code-switching skills (i.e. from black to white English), which the black working and unworking classes generally do not possess (Smitherman, 2000).

If Blacks are able to code-switch (from black to white English) so are Non-African Americans. It is with that premise that Black sitcoms come into play. Since the television is the gateway to diversity and social learning is translated through watching television. Non-Blacks have begun to use Black English as it is heard on television to interact with African American, assuming that Blacks behave like the characters in Black sitcoms. Zook (1999) argues that the dynamics of gender and sexuality (conscious or otherwise) shape reception practices among in-group viewers. She looks at the reception practices among black sitcoms like *Martin* and *Living Single*. For example, an analysis of reception practices surrounding these shows might look at the real-life adaptation of various phrases used by Martin Lawrence in everyday conversations "You go, girl!" or

"You so Crazy" (Zook, 1999). It fair to believe that professional African American women have encountered these phrases in professional environment from their counterparts who are non-African Americans.

Black Women and Language

Language is a code of power and privlege. There have been several studies that indicate that there are gender and racial communication styles. In a study of communication stereotypes, Ogawa (1971) found that White students perceive Blacks as argumentative, emotional, aggressive, straightforward, critical, sensitive, ostentatious, defiant, hostile, open, responsive, and intelligent (Popp, Donvan, Crawford, Marsh, & Peele, 2003). In a comparable study, Leonard and Locke found that White participants believed Black people's speech to be loud, ostentatious, aggressive, active, boastful, talkative, friendly, noisy, straightforward, emotional, argumentative, and witty (Popp, et al., 2003). Like gender stereotypes, beliefs regarding race and speech may be dichotomous. There is preliminary evidence that beliefs about the way people speak based on their race are nonoverlapping (as cited in Leonard & Locke, 1993, Popp, et al. 2003). Of 21 adjectives used to describe speech, only 3 (i.e., aggressive, boastful, and noisy) were used to describe both Black people's and White people's speech. In general, Black people's speech is believed to be louder and more hostile than White people's speech (Popp, et al., 2003).

There is a notable lack of research on current gender stereotypes, beliefs about the speech of Black Americans, and the influence of gender and race on speech stereotypes (Popp, et al., 2003). Feminists, especially Black feminists, have long argued that gender and race are intimately connected and cannot be understood apart from each other (as

cited in Collins, 1990, Popp, et al., 2003). Combining gender and race may not produce a purely additive impact on White Americans' perception of women of color; instead, gender and race may interact in complex ways that require additional research to untangle (Popp, et al., 2003). Weitz and Gordon examined images of "American" women and Black women and found that the top three traits used to describe American women were intelligent, materialistic, and sensitive, whereas Black women were most often characterized as loud, talkative , and aggressive (Popp, et al., 2003).

Acocording to Popp and her collegaues (2003), stereotypes about Black women may represent a unique cognitive category, not just the sum of stereotypes about women (with the default value White) and Blacks (with the default value male). In relation to speech style research, the stereotypes about Black women's speech may be different from the beliefs about women's speech (where no race or White race is identified) or men's talk (both White and Black). Yet, Black women are the group most neglected and overlooked when researchers examine solely gender or race stereotypes (Popp, et al., 2003).

Stereotypes are important because they may function not only to describe "what is" but also to prescribe "what should be" in social interaction (Popp, et al., 2003). For White women, stereotypes of polite, deferential speech are linked to negative judgments of women who deviate from the norm by speaking directly and assertively (as cited in Crawford, 1995, Popp, et al., 2003). There is scant research on the majority culture's perceptions of Black women, the impact of speech stereotypes on judgments of Black women is not substantiated by empirical evidence (Popp, et al., 2003).

Self-image as a Result of Black Sitcoms

Negative images in the news promote harmful effects on African Americans such as, low-self esteem among some blacks. Entman's (1992) examined the news media and found that African Americans are frequently shown in the physical grasp of police officers in both local and network television news violent/drug stories. This reinforces the stereotype that African Americans accused of a crime are more threatening than white defendants who are less likely to appear on camera in the grasp of police officers. He also found a difference in verbal representation of African Americans and whites. Both the pictures and verbal connotation coupled with the black of varied images of African American life further contribute to hostility and rejection African Americans by white mainstream society (Entman, 1992). African American's mistakes are being deliberately pointed out and they resemble barbarians in the news. Entman theorizes that negative images encourage white racist hostility, rejection, and denial toward African American aspirations more effectively called modern racism. Research reveals a direct relationship between high exposure to television and low self-esteem among African Americans (Tan and Tan, 1979). This study does not give exact data on the direct effects of harmful images of African Americans in television news.

As Blacks continue to be misrepresented in the media, research shows discrepancy on the review of African American attitudes, perceptions and social behaviors related to the media across the board. Poindexter and Stroman (1980), pointed out there is a need to identify the effects of media coverage or the lack thereof, to record the attitudes, beliefs, values and make-up of African Americans, both anti-social and pro-social behaviors. The studies are fragmented and there is no clear research to establish

that their theory is true. Tan and Tan (1979) suggested that self-images are created from the expectations of others in the same environment . The expectations of others along with negative images of African Americans in the news, sitcoms, or dramas can play a significant role in negative stereotypes and can promote self-hate.

The researcher believes sitcoms are not the only place African Americans should be featured. Some researchers believe that dramas do not cast African American, because of previous racial stereotyping in American popular culture. African Americans are overly portrayed in sitcoms and researchers argue that the predominant reliance on the comedy format for representing black life restricts the themes and types of values to exploration (Sklar, 1980, Matabane, 1988). Most researchers are quick to point out that African Americans are less likely to be seen in prime-time dramas; but, when blacks are placed in roles outside of comedies, their characters are limited and sometimes stripped personality. Hunt (1999) researched that *The Practice* and prime-time televised drama set in Boston with a 26.5 percent African American population in the city. Hunt (1999) found that 22 percent of the drama's black characters, which are portioned to the city's population, the mean screen time for these characters was a total of five minutes per hour of programming. This show was named six in the Nielson rating in 1999. Researchers should pay attention to the characters in dramas. In most cases they become one-dimensional. The character is only shown working in his or her occupation and he or she does have a life outside of their work (Hunt, 1999). These studies have not considered the negative effectives one-dimensional characters have on African Americans and what this says to Americans.

Linguistics Used in Sitcoms

Research shows that early sitcoms were created, written, produced, and directed by White men. In the words of Will Smith the star of the hit comedy series the "*Fresh Prince*", he often tutored the writers for the series about the linguists of the Black Community (Zook, 1999). One writer for the series admitted that the first time she listened to rap it was a homework assignment for the show. Will Smith gave Susan Borowitz a crash course of Hip Hop 101, schooling her in black street vernacular, such as the *fly* and *dope* (Zook, 1999). Susan Borowitz's husband who was the co-writer in the series conceded that, black sitcom writing is largely "guesswork" done by whites (Zook, 1999). "You have eight white writers in a room with one black trainee," he explained " and they ask him: 'Do blacks still say def a lot?'" Alfonso Riberio played Carlton on the series. His character exemplifies the epitome of a well-rounded educated black man. Carlton is usually put down by Will for not being black enough and because he does not use blackvoice: " Just because I grew up in the best neighborhood and pronounce the I-n-g's at the end of my words doesn't make me any less black than you," quips Carlton in episode where he defends himself to Will demeaning insults.

In an episode of *Martin,* Gina gives Mira a perm shortly after Mira tells Gina, "I can't sit here all day. I got *mens waiting* to see me" (Bogle, 2001). Black sitcoms have always used Ebonics to deliver punch lines and usually at the expense of the African American Community. Though some critics would argue that *Martin* was nostalgic his presence was felt throughout America. His encapsulating energy and perspective on life created a new language with his famous catchphrase like : "You go, girl!" "You so

crazy!" "Wass up!" and "Don't go there" caught the ears of those who had never viewed the show, and the popular lexicon was dispersed into society (Bogle, 2001).

Professional African American in the Workplace

African American women are not advancing as far in corporate America as their white, Asian, and Latino counterparts. The biggest barriers they face are negative race based stereotypes; more frequent questioning of their credibility and authority; and the lack of institutional support, according to the Catalyst survey advancing African American women in the Workplace (Brown, 2004). Black women are normally stereotyped as: angry, conniving, defensive, confrontational, loud, arrogant and unprofessional. According to the Catalyst, a nonprofit research and advisory firm, African American women represented an important and growing source of talent in 2004 represent 1.1 percent of corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies (Brown, 2004).

The Catalyst survey found that participants cited exceeding performance expectations, communicating effectively, connecting with mentors, and building positive relationships with mangers and colleagues (Brown, 2004). The survey's findings were based on quantitative findings of a group of African American women as Fortune 1000 companies and qualitative findings from focus groups of entry and mid level African American women, more than 50 percent of whom hold a graduate degree (Brown, 2004). In addition the survey found that the most common barrier African American women faced were: (1) not having an influential sponsor or mentor 43 percent; (2) lack of informal networks; (3) lack of company role models of the same racial or ethnic group 31 percent; and (4) lack of high-visibility projects 29 percent. The survey also cited that

Black women felt that their White colleagues perceive them as under-qualified and questioned their credibility at 32 percent (Brown, 2004).

Final Destination

There is more to the African American culture than clowning, and acting as a buffoon on television. African Americans are portrayed negatively in the media, especially in sitcoms, news and prime-time dramas. It is imperative for African Americas to change the perception of society and produce positive and realistic images of blacks in the media. It is pivotal to their communities' success, advancement and self-esteem. African Americans must generate more black producers, creators and directors to solve the problem of the distorted African American image. Blacks should be represented in key entertainment to improve the black image portrayed n the media.

Researchers believe that dramas do not cast African Americans, because of previous racial stereotyping in American popular culture. African Americans are overly portrayed in sitcoms and researchers argue that the predominant reliance on the comedy format for representing black life restricts the themes and types of values to exploration (Sklar, 1980; Matabane, 1988). Most researchers are quick to point out that African Americans are less likely to be seen in primetime dramas; but when blacks are placed in roles outside of comedies, their characters are limited and sometimes stripped of personality. The characters are only shown working in his or her occupation and he or she does have a life outside of their work. However, in most cases these characters with professional occupations in these dramas speak Standard English. These studies have not considered the negative effectives one-dimensional characters have on African Americans and what this says to Americans.

The researcher has concluded that most research was conducive to reporting only, rather than displaying statistics concerning negative stereotypes in the media relating to African Americans. Results also showed that White males have power over the media, as network executives and producers, controlling the airwaves. If African Americans position themselves in key entertainment positions, the stereotypes will decrease and African Americans can change some of the inequalities blacks face. African Americans make up 12 percent of the United States' population and they comprise 3.5 percent of the Screen Actors Guild and 2.7 percent of the employed film writers, and about 3 percent of TV directors. Black entertainers should find ways to by-pass the large studios and align themselves with other black financial institutions to pay and market the distribution of African American television. Negative stereotypes that affect African Americans can be reduced in the media if Americans seek other areas of information. Television is for entertainment, but it also distorts the reality of the black culture.

CHAPTER 3

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Sample Selection

One hundred and thirty-four women were surveyed to answer the research questions concerning African American sitcoms: A linguistic analysis of negative stereotypes in African American sitcoms and their effects on the professional African American female. Each participant surveyed was given a consent form, which had been approved by the university's research review board. The consent form defined the study and informed the participant of her write to decline the survey at anytime without penalty. All the participants surveyed for this research were professional African American women. More than half of the participants sampled were college-educated women. Seventy-two percent of the participants had acquired post-graduated degrees or professional degrees, and 38 percent had only received undergraduate degrees. The researcher collected data for three days April 27th, 28th, and 29th of 2005. The research required these women to be members of civic and professional African American organizations. The data collected was obtained from members of the Houston Young Professional Urban League, Top Ladies of Distinction, and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

The researcher found five age categories 11.6 percent of the surveyed were between the ages of 18 to24, the majority of the women sampled were between the ages of 25 and 29 at 30 percent, 28 percent were 30 to35 years of age, and 24.0 percent of the women surveyed were 46 years old and older.

Instrumentation

The survey was measured in five sections habits, self-esteem, recognition, and improvement with a total of 38 questions. Participants were ask to recall how many nights a week they viewed African American sitcoms and on which television stations. Though research proves that most African American sitcoms are featured on Monday and Tuesday evenings on UPN it is highly likely the participant would remember the exact stations, though they watch them frequently.

The researcher asked the participants to recall times that they recognized negative stereotypes in the workplace and/or in a professional environment concerning language. Questions (6,7, 8, 15, 16, 17, and 18) focused on the possible effects of African American sitcoms and the influence they have on language. The participants had four answer choice yes, sometimes, unsure and no. Participants were also questioned about their language use in the workplace (question 9).

The researcher used a Likert Scale to solicit participant's opinions of African American sitcoms and the possible effects it has on the African American professional woman (questions 3, 13, 20, 26, and 28), as well as how to improve negative stereotypes projected in sitcoms that spill over into society concerning language and behavior (questions 27 and 29). This five point measuring tool asked the participant to selected a responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

Data Analysis Procedure

To facilitate data processing and analyses, the researcher developed a codebook by assigning numerical codes to response choices for each question as shown in Appendix.

For data analyses, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 13.0 program was utilized. Frequency distributions and cross-tabulations were used to answer the major research questions. The following chapter presents the results.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1

What message is sent to the community about African American women and the language used in African American sitcoms and are they portrayed fairly? The findings show that 60 percent of the women surveyed said the language used in African Americans sitcoms embarrasses them. Table 1 reports the findings more accurately as the question relates to African American women being embarrassed by the language used in African American sitcoms.

Table 1

Embarrassed by the Language Used

Embarrassment	N	%
Yes	16	12.6
Sometimes	76	59.8
No	35	27.6
No response	7	5.2
Total	134	100.0

N: Number of participants, %: percentage of sample

Further evidence proved that 40 percent are sometimes insulted by the physical appearance of African American characters in sitcoms and 36 percent are insulted of the 127 who answered. Interestingly, the research shows that women over 46 years of age were more insulted by the physical appearance of characters in African American sitcoms

than in any other age group at 36.4 percent and the least concerned with physical appearance were those ranging from ages 36 to 45 at 6.8 percent. There is a large gap between those who are insulted by the physical appearance and those who are not. Table 2 reflects the opinions of the participants concerning the physical appearance of characters in Black sitcoms categorized by age groups.

Table 2

Insulted by the Physical Appearance

Insulted by physical appearance/Age Gap	N	%
18-24	9	20.5
25-29	7	15.9
30-35	9	20.5
36-45	3	6.8
46& plus	16	36.4
Total	44	100

N: Number of participants; %: percentage of sample

Research Question 2

Are non-African Americans adopting the African American language and using it in the workplace because they view African American sitcoms? When asked the question "Do you use Standard English in the workplace?" Ninety percent of the women said "yes". Forty-nine percent said "no" when asked, "Does it matter with whom you are conversing when you are speaking Standard English?" Despite that fact that 90 percent of the women said they speak Standard English, 31 percent believe that it does matter to

whom you are speaking with when using Standard English. Reflected in Tables 3 and 4 respectively.

Table 3

Standard English in the Workplace

Standard English	N	%
Yes	116	89.9
Sometimes	9	7.0
No	3	2.3
Unsure	1	0.8
No response	5	
Total	134	100.0

N: Number of participants; %: percentage of sample

Table 4

Does it Matter with Whom You Are Conversing When Speaking Standard English?

Standard English	N	%
Yes	40	30.8
Sometimes	24	18.5
No	65	50.0
Unsure	1	.08
No response	4	
Total	134	100.0

N: Number of participants; %: percentage of sample

Though 90 percent of the women said they speak Standard English in the workplace they had also encountered non-African Americans changing their dialect to accommodate them at 40 percent in the workplace. According to the research not only do non-African Americans changing their dialect, 44 percent of the participants believed that they are aware they change their dialect. In addition, 70 percent of the participants said that co-workers had changed their dialects or vernacular in an intentionally humorous way, whereas only 27 percent said no they had not encountered this situation (Table 5). There is little different between those who are not offended (17.2 percent) and those who are sometimes offended (28.1 percent) by non-African Americans who use African American Vernacular English; and 52 percent are defiantly offended.

Table 5

Non-African Americans Changing Dialect (humorous way)

Change Dialect	N	%
Yes	94	72.3
No	29	22.3
Unsure	5	3.8
No response	6	
Total	134	100.00

N: Number of participants; %: percentage of sample

Sixty-three percent of the participants had encountered co-workers using "black street slang" to converse with them in the workplace a replicate of the statistics is shown below in Table 6. Not only are non-African Americans using "black street slang" in a professional setting, 70 percent of the participants had come across non-African

Americans using African American Vernacular English, Ebonics, or Black English in a public setting, only 27 percent said "no" they had never encountered either situation (shown in Table 7).

Table 6

Non-African Americans/Co-Workers Using "Black Street Slang"

Black Street Slang	N	%
Yes	60.4	62.8
No	26.9	35.7
Unsure	2	1.6
No response	5	
Total	134	100.0

N: Number of participants; %: percentage of sample

Table 7

Non-African Americans Using African American Vernacular In Public Setting

Non-African Americans/Vernacular	N	%
Yes	81	62.8
No	46	35.7
Unsure	2	1.6
No response	5	
Total	134	100.0

N: Number of participants; %: percentage of sample

Research Question 3

Does the behavior of African American characters in Black sitcoms affect the professional African American woman? There is only a 1.6 percent difference between

those women who notice negative stereotypes in African American sitcoms and those who sometimes notices negative stereotypes, mirrored in Table 8.

Table 8

Notice Negative Stereotypes

Notice	N	%
Yes	61	49.2
Sometimes	59	47.6
No	4	3.2
No response	10	
Total	134	100.0

N: Number of participants; %: percentage of sample

Thirty-eight percent of the participants were neutral when asked if "African American sitcom characters are a reflection of themselves?" There was a small portion of the participants who disagreed with the idea that the characters in African American sitcoms reflected them at 26 percent and only 9.4 percent strongly disagreed.

One hundred and twenty-five of the participants answered the following question: "Do you believe African American sitcoms reflect and transmit the predominant values and ideology of society?" Fifty percent of those who answered do not believe that African American sitcoms broadcast the values and beliefs of the African American community. These professional African American women strongly agreed at 30.2 percent that African American images projected in sitcoms are filtered racial misconceptions produced by white writers, producers and directors, however more agreed at 36 percent (Table 9). According to the data, of the one hundred and twenty-six who responded to the statement, "Would you say that the African American image portrayed

in sitcoms is instrumental in molding public opinion and influencing public discourse?" The majority of them agreed at 41 percent, 14 percent remained neutral, 12 percent disagreed and only 0.8 strongly disagreed.

Table 9

Filtered Racial Misconceptions

Filtered misconceptions	N	%
Strongly Agree	38	30.2
Agree	45	35.7
Neutral	25	19.8
Disagree	18	14.3
No response	8	
Total	134	100

N: Number of participants; %: percentage of sample

Additional Findings

Previous research shows that African American sitcoms are germane to Monday nights and the research the researcher conducted prove the same. Sixty-one percent of the participants said that watched the majority of African American sitcoms on Monday nights, Wednesday night was the second most watched night for African American sitcoms at 7.1 percent and the least watched night for African American Sitcoms were Thursdays and Sundays, both scoring nine percent. As Darnell Hunt's (UCLA, 2002) "Prime Time in Black and White: Making Sense of the 2001 Fall Season," research found that African American were concentrated on UPN, the researcher found that that 77.1 percent of the participants viewed African American sitcoms on Monday nights and on UPN.

Fascinatingly, the data illustrates that 40 percent of the participants believe that African Americans sitcoms do not reduce negative stereotypes. However, when asked to respond to the following statement: "African American sitcoms address the African American culture" 40 percent of the participants remained neutral. Fifty percent agreed that if networks broaden their focus on urban viewers this would give other groups a better understanding of African Americans. A large percentage (44 percent) agreed that African American sitcoms should include a diverse cast in order to produce a realistic view of society; and 42 percent agreed that adding a diverse cast to an African American sitcom would help to eliminate negative stereotypes about race relationships between Whites and Blacks.

Fifty-one percent of the surveyed participants believed that writers of African American sitcoms should challenge the African American community by addressing African American issues. A resonating 61 percent strongly agreed that African American actors/actresses, creators, writers, producers and directors should take an active role in designing African American sitcoms to change negative stereotypes perceived by other racial groups. Though the participants did agree that the African American actors/actresses, creators, writers, producers and directors should take more responsibility, they also believed that producers, writers and directors in general hold more control over the American viewer at 56 percent (Table 10).

Table 10

Control Over American Viewer

Control	N	%
Producers/writers/directors	61	55.5
Society	28	25.5
Actors/Actresses	17	15.5
Unsure	4	3.6
No response	24	
Total	134	100.0

N: Number of participants; %; percentage of sample

Discussion

The research was guided by three questions: (1) What message is sent to the community about African American women and the language used in African American sitcoms and are they portrayed fairly? (2) Are non-African Americans adopting the African American language and using it in the workplace because they view African American sitcoms? (3) Does the behavior of African American characters in African American sitcoms affect the Professional African American woman?

The findings show that the language used in African American sitcoms sometimes embarrasses professional African American women. The researcher found that the participants are insulted by the appearance of the characters in African American sitcoms at 40 percent. Moreover, the researcher found that women over the age of 46 were more insulted at the physical appearance than any other age group and the least insulted by the physical appearance of characters in sitcoms ranged from ages 36 to 45. Perhaps, the

participants over the age of 46 watch more African American sitcoms and are able to recognize negative stereotypes. There is also a possibility that women over the age of 46 have experienced more racism than the younger participants.

The data shows that the majority of professional African American women speak Standard English in the workplace. Which leads the researcher to believe that the women surveyed do not see a true reflection of themselves in some African American sitcoms. Even though 90 percent of the participants proclaimed they spoke Standard English in the workplace some also reported that it sometimes mattered with whom they were speaking to when speaking Standard English. As a result, the researcher assumed that it is very likely that the participants Style-switched depending on whom they are speaking with and where they are speaking. Style switching is common to many professional African Americans or educated African American speakers but particularly typical of Ebonics speakers because the circumstances under which they use style switching depend on certain social variables that are rather unique to the Black experience (Seymour & Seymour, 1979). Some African American sitcoms are sending the message that some African Americans are incapable of speaking Standard English, which leads to negative stereotypes. In addition, a number of non-African Americans perceive Black Speak used in African American sitcoms as a way of communicating with African Americans in the workplace or in public settings. Which leads to offense or disrespect in the professional African American woman's eyes.

The researcher used the Social Learning Theory to test the research question: Are non-African Americans adopting the African American language and using it in the workplace because they view African American sitcoms? The Social Learning Theory

focuses on the learning that occurs within a social context. It considers that people learn from one another, including such concepts as observational learning, imitation, and modeling. The researcher found that non-African Americans are using Black English and African American women in the workplace or being affected.

There was no conclusive evidenced that proved that non-African Americans are not watching African American sitcoms. The researcher is suggesting that they are watching African American sitcoms, because of the prevalence of the television. It is with that idea that the researcher argues that non-African Americans or mimicking, imitating, or modeling what they have observed in African American characters in sitcoms.

The research shows that professional African American women have encountered non-African Americans using "black street slang", in addition to changing their dialect or vernacular in an intentionally humorous way, to communicate with them in a professional and/or public setting. The first principle of the Social Learning Theory is observation. The researcher suggest that non-African Americans are observing the language of African Americans sometimes refer to as Ebonics, "black street slang" or Black Speak in African American sitcoms. Modeling is also a principle of the Social Learning Theory. Non-African Americans may feel that they have to change their dialect or vernacular by modeling what they have heard (observed) in the voices of African American characters they have viewed in African American sitcoms, believing they are communicating effectively with African Americans. In addition, non-African Americans are more likely to mimic, imitate or model the language of African Americans if they feel capable of executing the language successfully in the same manner they observed the

language in African American sitcoms, which is a result of self efficacy. As result, the potential of a professional African American woman being affected by the language and behavior of characters in African American sitcoms is very likely.

Fifty-two percent of the participants are offended when non-African Americans change their dialect or vernacular to communicate with African Americans. If non-African Americans are viewing African American sitcoms and the characters are using malapropisms or Ebonics it is possible that they associate that language with the professional African American woman and uses it to communicate with her. Thus, filtering racial misconceptions about the African American community. The results reflect that 90 percent of the participants would like to see a African American sitcoms that produces a true identity of the African American community; however, 39 percent of the participants checked neutral when given the statement: "African American characters in African American sitcoms are a reflection of you." Which lead the researcher to conclude that there is not a true reflection of the African American woman or community in African American sitcoms. Because there is not a true reflection of the African American woman in African American sitcoms a possible long-term effect could be the result of lost identity. If a professional African American woman is constantly style-switching from Ebonics to Stand English in the workplace she could disconnect herself from her community. The research proved that African American women are sometimes embarrassed by the language and or behavior in African American sitcoms, which could cause them to style-switch in the workplace to reduce negative stereotypes. Therefore, professional African American women are affected by the characters behavior in African American sitcoms.

Fifty percent of the participants agreed that African American sitcoms do not reflect and transmit the predominant values and ideology of society. It was no surprise to find that African American sitcoms help to create negative stereotypes and is instrumental in molding public opinion and influencing public discourse concerning African Americans. Therefore, it is likely that African American sitcoms affect the professional African American woman in the workplace.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The researcher's goal was to focus on (1) the language and behavior of character(s) in African American sitcoms and the influence they have on society; (2) if non-African Americans are using the African American language to communicate with African Americans; and (3) negative stereotypes as it relates to language in sitcoms and the affect they have on the professional African American woman. The researcher selected 134 educated, professional African American women from various organization to test the following research questions: (1) What message is sent to the community about African American women and the language used in African American sitcoms and are they portrayed fairly?; (2) Are non-African Americans adopting the African American language and using it in the workplace because they view African American sitcoms?; and Does the behavior of African American characters in African American sitcoms affect the Professional African American woman?

The majority of the professional African Americans surveyed in this research agreed that large portions of African American sitcoms are featured on Monday nights and on UPN. This study shows that African American women do notice negative stereotypes in African American sitcoms, however they continue to watch the same African American sitcoms on Mondays and on UPN

Conclusion

There is no conclusive evidence that proves that non-African American are solely influenced by the language used in African American sitcoms, however research proves

that African Americans have encountered non-African Americans using Ebonics or "black street slang" to communicate with them. The television is usually the first exposure people have to other ethnic groups, religion, or culture. The media can influence the social and psychological viewer. In all likelihood non-African Americans are influenced by the images they see on television; and those images may cause them to react by mimicking what they have heard are seen in African American sitcoms. The same effect can happen to the professional African American woman. She can be influenced by the images portrayed in African American sitcoms that may cause to behave in a professional manner in the workplace such as speaking Standard English to contradict what non-African Americans have viewed in African American sitcoms.

R. M. Libert and J. Sprafkin (1988) authors of The Early Window: Effects of Television on Children and Youth, found that white children exposed to a negative television portrayal of African Americans had a negative change in attitude toward blacks. Therefore, it is very possible that those negative images viewed on television could spill over into an individual's adulthood and cause non-African Americans to treat African Americans in an offensive manner such as changing their dialect or using Ebonics to communicate with an African American. Watching African American sitcoms could have the reversal effect on the non-African American. Simple observation could cause the individual to imitate or model what they have heard or viewed in African American sitcoms.

The researcher was able to answer the following research question: "Are non-African Americans adopting the African American language and using it in the workplace because they view African American sitcoms?" Yes, some non-African

Americans have adopted "black street slang," Blackvoice or Black Speak and are using them in the workplace or in public settings. The researcher does not contend that the television is the only medium in which non-African Americans come across Black Speak or Blackvoice, however the researcher believes that access to television and the viewing of African American sitcoms are very influential. There are other catalyst that transports the African American language into society like music, sports, magazines, and art (graffiti).

Though the researcher was unable to prove that African American sitcoms are the only influences non-African Americans have to influence their behavior the researcher did prove that the characters in African American sitcoms affect professional African American women. There seems to be a large age gap between women who are insulted by the appearance of African American characters in African American sitcoms. Women over the age of 45 are five times likely to be insulted by the physical appearance of characters in African American sitcoms than women between the ages of 36 and 45. Maybe the reason women over 45 are more insulted by the physical appearance of African American characters in sitcoms could be they watch more television or more conscience of negative stereotypes. Women in the age category of 36 to 45 could possible watch less television, focused on careers, or raising families.

The language used in African American sitcoms is a possible effect on the language non-African Americans use to communicate or relate to African Americans. The bulk of the participants surveyed encountered non-African Americans using "black street slang", Ebonics or Black Speak in a professional or public setting. The end result explained that 50 percent of the women surveyed are offended when non-African

Americans use street jargon to communicate with them. Although, the research shows that these women use Standard English 90 percent of the time in the workplace, data also shows that they are able to style-switching depending on the person they are communicating with or the environment that they are in. Fifty-seven percent of the participants had received postgraduate or professional degrees and 26 percent disagreed with the idea that African American sitcoms were a reflection of their identity. Thus, one may assume that some African American sitcoms sometimes produce racial misconceptions about the African American woman. If African American sitcoms continue to produce racial misconceptions the cycle will continue and African Americans will continue to be at a disadvantage. Though the participants did not agree totally with the idea that characters in African American sitcoms are a true reflection of them they did not disagree either, that some of the characters in African American resemble them.

Recommendation

The research was conducted among 134 educated professional African American women it may be more feasible to broaden the spectrum by increasing the sample size. By increasing the same size the results will change dramatically and perhaps give the researcher a larger picture of the language used in African American sitcoms and the effect it has on the professional African American woman. If the researcher increases the sample size he/she should pool participants from different socioeconomic backgrounds. To increase the validity of the study the researcher should also conduct a focus group and include group discussion and visual aides (black sitcoms) to gain different opinions and experiences. It would also enhance the research if the researcher collected data from non-African Americans concerning their television watching habits of African American

sitcoms, and their use of Black English sometimes referred to as "black street slang."Another consideration may be to focus on African American sitcoms with a large black cast that include non-African Americans.

Future research should include the professional African Ameican male. Both African American women and men share a culturally background, however African American men are viewed differently among non-African American men. It would be an interesting study to see how often the African American male encounters non-African Americans using street jargon, Ebonics, Black English Vernacular or "black street slang" in a public or private setting.

The final suggestion for audience orientation is the researcher should open the participant pool and include African Americans who have not obtained graduate or professional degrees and compare their opinions to the opinions of the educated. The researcher should focus on language used in sitcoms, habits, recognition of negatives steretypes, and improvement. The researcher's goal should be to find out if the working class is concsientious of negative stereotypes and do they encounter non-African Americans using Black English to communicate with them in a public or private setting.

APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

Texas Southern University
Informed Consent Form
Research Title: African American sitcoms: A look at the linguistics used in sitcoms and negative stereotypes as they affect the professional African American female.

You are asked to participate in a research study by Tamara Allen, from the Communication Department at Texas Southern University, in Houston Texas. You have been asked to fill out this survey because you are an African American professional female.

Purpose of the study is to research the language and behavior of African American characters in situational comedies and their influence on societies' views of the African American female.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. The information you provide will be confidential and only reported in the aggregate. No one other than the researcher will have access to your answers.

If you agree to participate in this research, please complete the survey by following the instructions at the top of the survey. The survey should only take about 15 minutes. It is hoped that the data will be used to provide major networks with information that will influence writers, directors, producers, and actors or actresses in black sitcoms.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call Tamara Allen (832) 444-3921, e-mail or me at tam_all@msn.com.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Primary Contact
Tamara Allen
Graduate Student
Department of Communications
Texas Southern University
Houston, TX 77025

Principal Investigator
Dr. J. W. Ward
Dean of Communications
Department of Communications
Texas Southern University

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE

Sitcom and Language Survey

This survey will be used to probe professional African American women about their opinions concerning situational comedies. Because this is confidential, feel free to answer all the questions as accurately as possible. Simply select the answer choices that closest represent your point of view.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

1. On what nights do you mostly watch the majority of African American sitcoms? (circle all that apply)
   a. Monday b. Tuesday c. Wednesday
   d. Thursday e. Friday f. Saturday
   g. Sunday

2. On which channel would you most likely find African American sitcoms?
   a. ABC b. NBC c. UPN d. CBS e. FOX f. WB
   g. other (specify) _____

	Yes	Sometimes	No	Unsure
3. Do you notice negative stereotypes in African American sitcoms?				
4. Are you sometimes insulted by the physical appearance of African Americans in sitcoms?				
5. Does the language used in African American sitcoms embarrass you?				
6. In the workplace have you ever encountered people outside of your race who change their dialect to accommodate you?				
7. In your opinion would you say these individuals are aware that they have changed their dialect?				
8. When in a professional environment would you say that you are offended when people outside of your race use African American Vernacular English?				
9. Do you speak Standard English in the workplace?				
10. Does it matter with whom you are conversing when you are speaking Standard English?				

	Yes	No	Unsure
11. Would you like today's African American sitcoms to reflect a true identity of the African American family or community, in regards to engaging in in-group activities or working toward a collective goal?			
12. Would you like to see African American actors/actresses in more dramatic roles versus situational comedies?			
13. Do you believe African American sitcoms reflect and transmit the predominant values and ideology of society?			
14. Are you aware that most African American sitcoms ranging from the 60's, 70's and 80's were written, produced and directed by White men?			
15. Has a co-worker ever changed his or her dialect to accommodate you?			
16. Has a co-worker used "black street slang" while conversing with you in a professional setting?			
17. In a public setting, has an individual outside of your race used African			

American Vernacular English/ Ebonics/ Black English when talking to you?			
18. Have you been in a situation at work where your co-worker changed his or her dialect or vernacular in an intentionally humorous way?			

19. How often would you say Non-African Americans have changed their dialect or used African American Vernacular English while conversing with you in a professional environment? (circle one answer)
    a. seldom b. frequently c. all the time

	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
20. African American characters in Black sitcoms are a reflection of you.					
21. African American sitcoms reduce negative stereotypes about Black people.					
22. African American sitcoms address the African American culture.					
23. Networks have began to broaden their focus on urban viewers. Would you say this would give other groups a better understanding of African Americans?					
24. To offer a realistic view of society, should African American sitcoms include a diverse cast?					
25. Recently, several African American sitcoms have diversified their cast. Would you say this would help to eliminate negative stereotypes about race relationships between Whites and Blacks?					
26. Would you say that the African American image portrayed in sitcoms is instrumental in molding public opinion and influencing public discourse?					
27. Should the writers of African American sitcoms challenge the African American community by addressing African American issues?					
28. Do you believe the African American image produced by white writers, producers and directors in sitcoms has filtered racial misconceptions of African Americans?					
29. Do you believe African American actors/actress, creators, writers, producers and directors should take an active role in designing African American sitcoms to change negative stereotypes perceived by other racial groups?					

30. In your opinion, who would you say has the most control over the American Viewer. (choose only one)
    a. producers, writers, and directors b. society c. actors/actresses d. unsure

31. List three of your favorite African American sitcoms of all times.
    _____

    _____

    _____

32. Can you name at least one African American sitcom that portrays an African American or an African American family correctly?_____

33. What category best describes your educational background?
    a. finished grade school b. graduated high school c. graduated college
    d. GED e. some college
    f. post grad/professional degree

34. You are a. female b. male

35. How would you classify your ethnic background?
    a. Anglo Saxon b. African American c. Asian
    d. Native American e. Hispanic e. Other _____

36. What is your current occupation? (specify) _____

37. How old are you? a. 18-21 b. 22-24 c. 25-29 d. 30-35 e. 36-45 f. 46 +

38. How long do you watch African American sitcoms on a typical day?
    a. rarely b. 1-3 hours c. 4-6 hours d. 7-9 hours e. 10 hours and up

APPENDIX C: CODING INSTRUCTION

CODING INSTRUCTION FORM

Column	VARIABLE	Description
1	V1	Nights watched African American Sitcoms: 1 - Mon.; 2 -Tues.; 3 - Wed.; 4 – Thurs.; 5 –Fri.; 6 – Sat.; 7 – Sun.
2	V2	Most African American Sitcoms shown on: 1 – ABC; 2 – NBC; 3 – UPN, 4 – CBSFOX; 6 – WB; 7 – Other
3	V3	Notice Negative Stereotypes: 1 – Yes; 2 - Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
4	V4	Insulted by physical appearance of characters: 1 – Yes; 2 - Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
5	V5	Embarrassed by language: 1 – Yes; 2 - Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
6	V6	Non-African Americans change: dialect in workplace: 1 – Yes; 2 -Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
7	V7	Non-African Americans aware of dialect change: 1 – Yes; 2 -Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
8	V8	Offended by Non-African Americans: 1 – Yes; 2 - Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
9	V9	Standard English in the workplace: 1 – Yes; 2 – Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
10	V10	Standard English: 1 – Yes; 2 – Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
11	V11	True Reflection: 1 – Yes; 2 – Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
12	V12	African American Actors/Actresses in more dramatic roles: 1 – Yes; 2 – Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure

13	V13	African American transmit values and ideology of society: 1 – Yes; 2 – Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 - Unsure
14	V14	African American sitcoms produce by white men: 1 – Yes; 2 – Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
15	V15	Co-worker change dialect: 1 – Yes; 2 – Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
16	V16	Co-worker using "black street slang" 1 – Yes; 2 – Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
17	V17	Non-African Americans using African American Vernacular/Ebonics/ Black English public setting: 1 – Yes; 2 – Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
18	V18	Co-worker changing dialect intentionally: 1 – Yes; 2 – Sometimes; 3 – No; 4 – Unsure
19	V19	Non-African changing dialect in professional environment: 1 – Seldom; 2 – frequently; 3 – all the time
20	V20	Characters in African American a reflection of you: 1 – strongly agree; 2 – agree; 3 – neutral; 4 – disagree; 5 – strongly disagree
21	V21	Reduce negative stereotypes: 1 – strongly 2 – agree; 3 – neutral;4 – disagree; 5 – strongly disagree
22	V22	African American sitcoms address culture: 1 – strongly agree; 2 – agree; 3 – neutral; 4 – disagree; 5 – strongly disagree
23	V23	Broaden focus on urban viewers: 1 – strongly agree; 2 – agree; 3 – neutral; 4 – disagree; 5 – strongly disagree
24	V24	Diverse cast: 1 – strongly agree; 2 – agree; 3 – neutral;4 – disagree; 5 – strongly disagree

25	V25	Eliminate negative stereotypes: 1 – strongly agree; 2 – agree; 3 – neutral;4 – disagree; 5 – strongly disagree
26	V26	Mold public opinion: 1 – strongly agree; 2 – agree; 3 – neutral;4 – disagree; 5 – strongly disagree
27	V27	Address African American issues: 1 – strongly agree; 2 – agree; 3 – neutral;4 – disagree; 5 – strongly disagree
28	V28	Filtered racial misconceptions: 1 – strongly agree; 2 – agree; 3 – neutral;4 – disagree; 5 – strongly disagree
29	V29	Changing negative stereotypes: 1 – strongly agree; 2 – agree; 3 – neutral;4 – disagree; 5 – strongly disagree
30	V 30	Control over the American viewer: 1 – producers, writers and directors, 2 – society; 3 – actors/actresses; 4 – unsure
31 to 32	V 31	Favorite Sitcoms: 01 Girlfriends; 02 Sister to Sister; 03 Cuts; 04 Different World; 05 Family Matters; 06 The Cosby Show; 07 Good Times; 08 Eve; 09 The Parkers; 10 The Bernie Mac Show;11 The Jefferson; 09 The Parkers; 10 The Bernie Mac Show; 12 Sanford and Son; 13 The Steve Harvey Show;14 One on One; 15 Julia; 16 Living Single;17 The Jamie Foxx Show ;18 My Wife and Kids;19 Different Strokes; 20 What's Happening!; 21 Martin; 22 In Living Color; 23 Gimme a Break; 24 Half and Half; 25 Fresh Prince of Bel Air; 26 All of Us; 27 277; 28 Frank's Place; 29 Amos 'n' Andy
33	V32	Educational Background: 1 – grade school; 2 – graduate high school; 3 – graduate college; 4 – GED; 5 – some college; 6 – post grad/professional degree

34	V33	Gender: 1 – female; 2 – male
35	V34	Ethnic background: 1 – Anglo Saxon; 2 – African American; 3 – Asian; 4 – Native American; 5 – Hispanic; 6 – other
36	V36	Occupation: 01 Engineer; 02 Homemaker; 03 Buyer; 04 Public Relations Liaison; 05 Program Manager/Technology; 06 Graduate/Post Professional Student; 07 Communications Specialist; 8 Retired; 09 Teacher/Education; 10 Accountant; 11 Pharmacist; 12 Chemist; 13 Counselor; 14 Lease Analyst; 15 Project Manager; 16 Lawyer; 17 Consultant; 19 Administration; 20 Marketing Manager; 21 Sales Representative; 22 Human Resource Exe.; 17 Consultant; 19 Administration; 20 Marketing Manager; 21 Sales Representative; 22 Human Resource Exe.; 23 Manager; 24 Business Analyst; 25 Social Worker; 26 Stylist; 27 Law/Enforcement; 28 Law Student; 29 Entrepreneur; 30 Customer Service Representatives; 31 Computer Analyst
37	V37	Age: 1 – 18-21; 2 – 22-24; 3 – 22-24; 4 – 25 29; 5 – 30-35, 6 – 36-45; 7 – 46+
38	V38	How many hours spent watching African African American sitcoms: 1 – rarely; 2 – 1-3 hours; 3 – 4-6 hours; 4 – 7-9 hours; 5- 10 hours +

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