

Study: Little Has Changed for Asian Americans on TV, Film

Though APA population rises, number of television and movie roles are the same as 15 years ago, according to figures by research group in Philadelphia.

By JULIE HA
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In light of actor Steve Park's ("Fargo," "Do the Right Thing") earnest and increasingly famous "mission statement" calling for change in a racially insensitive and exclusionary Hollywood, you would think Asian Americans in the '90s are still shut out of major roles in American TV and film.

And, in fact, you would think right, according to the first annual Proportionate Representation of Diversity (PROD) index.

Produced by the Cultural Indicators research project directed by George Gerbner, the diversity index is like a report card of the entertainment industry's performance in representing racial and gender groups, as well as groups identified by sexual orientation, disability, age and income level.

It measures major speaking parts

in representative samples of prime time TV programs of the 1995-96 season and in the 40 top-grossing movies of 1994 and 1995.

It also looks at the types (hero vs. villain) and fates (success vs. failure, perpetrator of violence vs. victim of violence) of these characters.

According to the index, White males are cast in TV and film one-and-a-half times their proportion of the national population, while all other groups cast comprise one-third of their proportion of the population.

Gerbner calls the index a cultural indicator which shows that American TV and film has "absolutely reduced the variety and diversity of representation to the margins of our culture."

"We have an underrepresented American scene," he says.

"There is no ethnic and racial representation in prime time," added

Gerbner, based in Philadelphia and founder of the Cultural Environment Movement, an international coalition of more than 150 organizations dedicated to fairness, equity and diversity in media. He also serves as dean emeritus of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

Based on White males' overrepresentation and lack of diverse representation in media, Gerbner said, "The message sent to White suburban males is: 'You're in charge, it's OK to dominate every situation you can.'" On the contrary, the message sent "to women, to people of color, to children, to old people is, 'Beware, you better be cautious and deferential, or you get hurt.'"

Gerbner, a communications researcher and sociologist, contends American TV serves as a "marketing agent."

"As a marketing agent or operation, it targets those who are the best customers—upper and middle class White males, suburban types, and overrepresents those characters," he said. "It virtually ignores poor people."

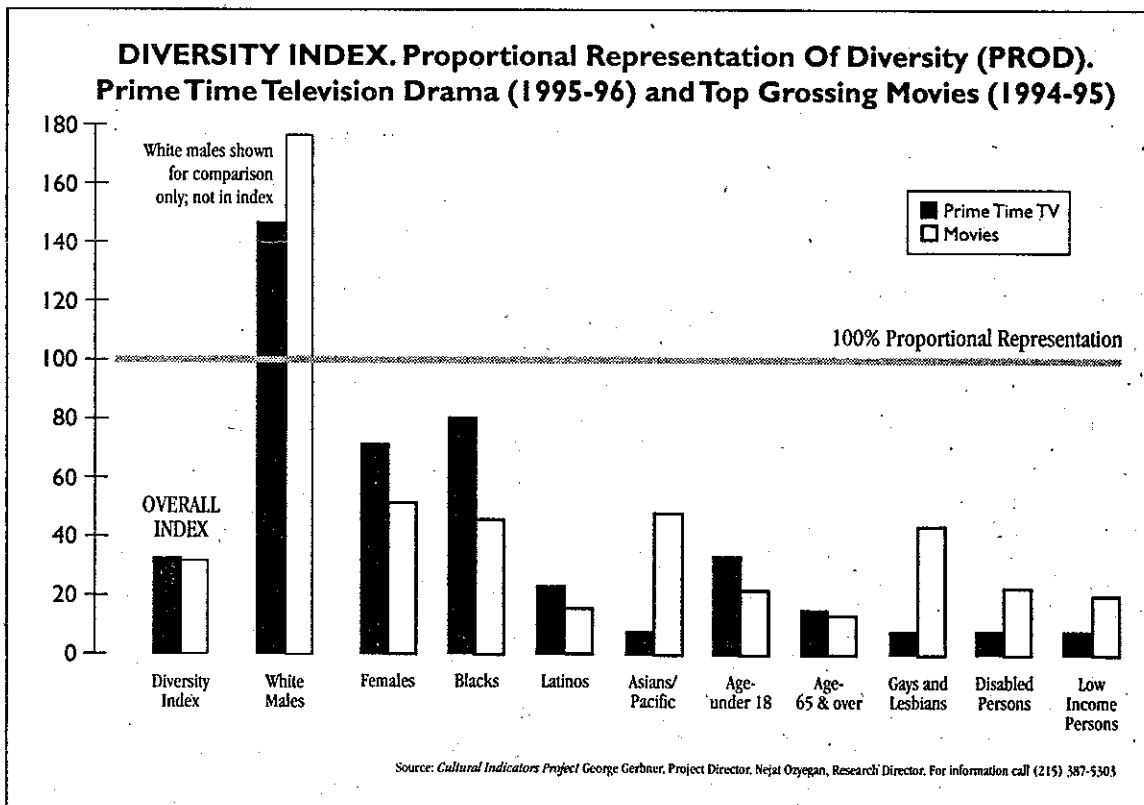
As for racial minority representation, Gerbner said, it's a "mixed picture."

"African Americans are (close to) proportional to their population in representation in drama, though in news, they don't fare so well and are [often connected] with crime and drugs," he said. "Other minorities—Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans—are vastly underrepresented and ill-fated."

"That's what makes minorities of people—they are culturally (influenced) to act in a more dependent and vulnerable way," Gerbner theorized.

While Asian Pacifics are 3.4 percent of the national population, they comprised only 0.3 percent of prime time TV characters in 1995-96 and 1.6 percent of characters in

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LISA SHIOZAKI/Rafu Shimpo

Asian Pacifics are 3.4 percent of the population, but only .3 percent are on prime time TV.

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the top box office films for 1994-95, according to the index. This means that Asian Pacifics have only 8.8 percent of their proportional representation on prime time TV and 47 percent of their proportional representation in film.

Based on the index findings, 8 percent of the Asian characters surveyed were cast in a positive light and 5 percent negative (as in heroes vs. villains).

However, Asian Pacific characters fail in their goals 80 percent of the time, compared to 67 percent for the general character population—a “remarkable” discrepancy, Gerbner noted.

As for being the perpetrator or the victim of violence, Asian characters are less likely to be either, said Gerbner. About 10 percent are perpetrators, versus 12 percent for the general character population, while 13 percent are victims, compared to 16 percent of the general character population.

“The main thing is underrepresentation,” he commented of Asian Pacifics. “They are mostly minor characters and are less successful.”

Notably, the survey took only one week per TV

season as a sample for measuring representation, since this study was interested in “repetitive and ritually exposed” media representation of groups.

The sample week was chosen to avoid sweeps time and holidays, so regular programming could be surveyed.

As for other groups surveyed, African American characters on prime time TV registered 10.6 percent, while their population is 12.1 percent nationally. In film, they do much worse, with African Americans making up 5.5 percent of the characters in top-grossing movies.

About 2.3 percent of prime time TV characters and 1.6 percent of top-grossing movie characters are Latinos, who make up 10.5 percent of the population.

While 51.2 percent of the population is female, 36.9 percent of media characters in prime time are women and 26 percent in film.

Low-income persons face similar underrepresentation. Although they are 15.1 percent of the population, 1.3 percent of prime time TV characters are low-income and only 3.1 percent are in big-draw movies.

Gays and lesbian characters are 0.6 percent of media characters on

prime time and 3.1 percent in movies, though their population estimates are at 7 percent.

Gerbner, a pioneering researcher on violence in TV and its impact on the cultural environment, contends that TV not only reveals vast underrepresentation of various groups, but shows how “American TV is no longer American TV.”

“Most producers in American TV cannot break even on the domestic market,” he explained. “They are producing for the world market to make a profit. What travels best on the global market is that which needs no translation, which speaks action in any language, which fits into any culture, which is violence. So violence is in TV not because people want it ... they don’t produce higher ratings at all.”

This global marketing formula may churn out big dollars for conglomerates, but have a negative impact on children, Gerbner said.

“What kind of world does TV present to all of our children, born into homes where TV is on 7 hours 41 minutes a day?” he asked. “We are essentially mortgaging the socialization of our children to a global marketing

formula which is devastating for them.

“(They become) more fearful, more apprehensive, more vulnerable. Women and girls are

more damaged because they see themselves underrepresented by one-to-three. They are having fewer occupations. They are not only underrepresented but overvictimized, so they develop a sense of vulnerability and that creates minorities out of a numeric majority.”

Gerbner has been studying these demographics in prime time TV and film for 30 years. Following the assassination of Robert Kennedy and John F. Kennedy, President Lyndon Johnson set up a national commission on the causes and prevention of violence, which called on Gerbner to produce a report on TV violence.

“The message to everybody is our culture is not free,” said the Hungary native. “It is highly, rigidly censored, not by the government, but by corporations interested in marketing.”

Over the last 10 or 15 years, he says, the figures in media representation of groups have been very stable.

“So (the most recent results) are no surprise,” Gerbner remarked. “The surprise is it doesn’t change.”

“The message sent to White suburban males is: ‘You’re in charge, it’s OK to dominate every situation you can.’”

—George Gerbner, who conducted a study on the American entertainment industry

(For more information on PROD, call (215) 387-5303 or send e-mail to CEM@libertynet.org.)