

**A Look at Media Portrayals of Powerful People and the Subsequent Effects on Children**

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## **Abstract**

It is a well-known fact that the media often stereotypes, misrepresents and/or underrepresents certain groups of people. However, there is less research about the ways in which powerful people are portrayed and how this can potentially affect impressionable young viewers. Most research to this date focuses solely on how men versus women are portrayed in positions of power without taking into account things like race, age and sexual orientation. Therefore, the aim of this project was to educate children about how the media misrepresents power and authority. The hope was to help the study participants understand that power is not limited to one group of people, despite the fact that the media often portrays people like men or white people as more powerful.

To accomplish this, a presentation was given to eighth-grade students at McLoughlin Middle School. The study included a pre-survey and pre-photo survey, a PowerPoint lesson, and a post-survey and post-photo survey. The surveys were intended to learn about the children's demographics, media literacy, understanding of stereotypes and perceptions about current media portrays. Results supported the first hypothesis that children will be able to better define a stereotype in the second questionnaire. The second hypothesis, that the children will circle more diverse people in the second photo survey, was not supported. The third hypothesis was also not supported: that children will circle lower numbers on the post-survey on the questions about representation and role models. These findings suggest that the lesson was uniquely successful in opening the children's eyes to how the media misrepresents power and how it is often concentrated in white people and men. Additionally, it is important to note that children at this age are still young enough to benefit from lessons such as this, so continued education is necessary.

## **Table of Contents**

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	3
A. Stereotypes, Social Cognitive Theory & Wishful Identification.....	3
B. Media’s Role in Socialization.....	3
C. Gender Development & Media.....	4
D. Media Literacy’s Role .....	5
E. Media Portrayals & Gender .....	5
F. STEM & Gender/Race Portrayals in Media.....	7
G. Minorities in Media .....	8
H. Women in Politics .....	8
I. Literature Review Conclusion.....	9
Chapter 3: Method.....	11
A. Participants .....	11
B. Logistics.....	11
C. Procedures.....	12
Chapter 4: Results.....	15
A. Demographics of Participants.....	15
B. Pre-Survey Questions & Method .....	15
C. Post-Survey Questions & Method .....	18
D. Pre & Post Photo Surveys.....	19
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	20
A. Findings and Conclusion .....	20
B. Limitations and Directions for Future Research.....	22
Works Cited.....	24
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Permissions .....	26
Appendix B: Pre-survey .....	27
Appendix C: Pre-photo survey .....	28
Appendix D: Post-survey .....	29
Appendix E: Post-photo survey.....	30

## **Introduction**

The media has long created and perpetuated stereotypes about all different groups of people. A particularly insidious (and understudied) example of this is the way the media (television, movies, magazines, etc.) portrays people in positions of power and the subsequent effects this has on children. Children are especially vulnerable to stereotypes as their brains develop and they form opinions, beliefs, and perhaps even prejudices and biases. For example, one study showed that kids can “display racial bias at an age as young as 3 years old” (Gordon). So, what happens when the media regularly portrays people in powerful positions as only white or only men? Digging into these stereotypes is the purpose of this paper.

Despite the range of powerful positions portrayed in the media, stereotypes are consistently used to communicate ideas about who the people that hold these positions are or should be. Some powerful positions include: doctors, lawyers, politicians, managers/CEOs, those in the military, activists, officers, firefighters and more. Certain groups are shown far more regularly in powerful positions, such as men or white people, which leaves minority groups either unrepresented or misrepresented. When minority groups *are* portrayed in a powerful position, it is often stereotyped in a negative or incorrect way. For example, women CEOs or leaders are often depicted as being cold, heartless, or bossy, which completely discredits and belittles actual women CEOs.

This is an important topic because it involves children’s perceptions about power and authority, as well as how those topics relate to gender, race and class in terms of who a powerful person can be. For instance, if children see primarily white people in positions of power, then they might begin to believe that as the truth. Furthermore, if a child does not fit the mold of who they see portrayed in the media, they might believe that they cannot hold powerful positions in

the future. These stereotypes can also affect how children act in the future. For instance, young girls might only see examples of ruthless female leaders and therefore act like that when they grow up, further perpetuating the stereotype.

### **Overview**

This will be a comprehensive paper and will include a literature review, background information about the study, results of the study and the main conclusions drawn. The literature review will look at previous research regarding topics such as: how the media portrays and stereotypes people in positions of power, how children are affected by stereotypes in the media and the intersection of power and race, gender and class. The literature will then be evaluated in order to guide the study.

### **Literature Review**

Generation Z is growing up surrounded by mass media in a way that no other generation before them has experienced. These images that young people see in the media become effective teachers and influence viewers more than most people realize. According to Mastro, the media is so powerful that it can either make viewers question “stereotypical views of social groups” or reinforce them (qtd. in Scharrer and Ramasubramaniam 171). Society is willing to believe media’s portrayals of different social groups because of the innate need individuals have to connect with one another. The media, and television in particular, offers viewers a wide range of people and characters with which to easily connect (Hoffner and Buchanan 326). This drive for connection often results in the overlooking of stereotypes or problematic portrayals of various groups. Sometimes people connect so deeply with those they see in the media that they experience a “psychological matching process.” This process is a subset of social cognitive theory and is described by Albert Bandura as when someone changes the way he or she thinks, feels, and/or acts to match someone else (Hoffner and Buchanan 326). A similar theory is wishful identification, which, according to Feilitzen and Linne, is when someone “desires or attempts to become like another person” (qtd. in Hoffner and Buchanan 327). These processes probably happen most commonly with children, as they are the most vulnerable population to the negative effects of mass media.

Children are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of mass media because of their naiveté and undeveloped critical thinking abilities. The mass media can affect children in many ways, and much research has been done on topics like this, but little to no research focuses on how the media portrays powerful people and any consequences that might stem from these often-stereotypical portrayals. The little research that has been done focuses solely on gender and how

men and women in positions of power are portrayed differently. Indeed, Signorielli posits that “media may act as a key socializing agent for gender role development” (qtd. in Coyne 1909). However, it seems safe to assume that if the media is so important for gender development that it would be just as important for all areas of development, such as how children perceive power or authority, as well as their own abilities in powerful positions.

Gender development, according to England et al., is shaped by modeling and direct tuition (qtd. in Coyne 1911). Modeling is when “gendered behavior” is learned through watching others, including those in the media. Direct tuition is when children are “rewarded for engaging in behaviors considered appropriate for their sex” (Coyne 1911). Again, though these two theories specifically discuss gender development, it is safe to assume that other types of behavior can just as easily be learned in these ways. For instance, the definition for modeling can be reworked to read: when children learn what kinds of people are powerful, as well as how powerful people act, through the media. Furthermore, Bandura’s social cognitive theory argues that children may “learn attitudes and behaviors,” which are not limited to those relating to gender, “...from media characters” (Long 358). Finally, several studies have shown that children “imitated or wanted to be like a successful character,” even when that character had different views, beliefs, or values (Hoffner and Buchanan 331). Thus, it remains clear that the media is incredibly influential on children, but much of the research focuses solely on gender development. Portrayals of power, further than how it connects with gender, is an important area of study to consider, yet the current research is lacking.

Another important aspect to consider is a child’s level of media literacy. Since children are such a vulnerable population, it is critical that they are media literate. According to Aufderheide, media literacy is the “ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate

messages in a variety of forms” (qtd. in Scharrer and Ramasubramanian 172). Essentially, one is media literate if one is able to critically analyze and discuss media. One media literacy theory is the inoculation theory, which was proposed by McGuire and suggests that being previously exposed to a “persuasive attempt” can aid in reducing “the impact of subsequent persuasive attempts” (qtd. in Scharrer and Ramasubramanian 173). When people are faced with counter-arguments, they must strengthen their own arguments to be able to respond. This process can work to dismantle stereotypes and overall improve one’s media literacy. Indeed, past studies have indicated that media literacy interventions, such as the inoculation theory, can actually “shift attitudes and promote knowledge.” However, with that being said, there are few to no studies on how media literacy education can work to lessen stereotypes (Scharrer and Ramasubramanian 173-4). Therefore, while it has been found that media literacy can shift attitudes, it remains unclear if media literacy can truly reduce stereotypes.

This research concerns the stereotypes of how people in positions of power are portrayed by the media and the subsequent affects these portrayals have on children. Looking at the fictionalized media (television, film, etc.), there are several studies about how powerful people are portrayed, but they almost always focus on the differences between portrayals of powerful men and (usually not as powerful) women.

A study conducted by Tonya Hammer looked at how women’s career choices are portrayed in films. She examined 117 characters from 81 films and found that 82 women had traditional careers, such as housewife or teacher, 24 had nontraditional careers, such as boxer or criminal, and four had oppressive careers, which included aspects of drugs and/or prostitution (Hammer 268). Her overall findings suggested that in almost all roles, the woman focused more on a relationship than on her career. Hammer explains that a woman’s career is often depicted



“simply as the means by which the woman meets her significant other, and all her troubles are solved” (270). Thus, according to this study, women in film are regularly portrayed in traditional careers and as love interests, but far less often in actual positions of power. And if these women ever became powerful, the “stereotype of ice queen was depicted... by the act of isolating them and providing no relationship in their life” (Hammer 270). These depictions suggest that women must choose either their career or their love life, as well as the idea that powerful women can only hold power if they are mean or without familial relationships. This can be incredibly influential for young viewers, especially young girls, as they imagine future careers and eventually enter the workforce.

It is also worth mentioning that these gender and power stereotypes become ingrained in children, and again, especially young girls, at a very young age. England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek conducted a “content analysis of Disney princess movies from 1937 to 2009” and discovered that these movies still feature strong themes and messages of “traditional gender role stereotypes for girls and women (e.g., physically weak... submissive)” (qtd. in Coyne 1910). Therefore, young girls consistently see these princesses in positions of less power than their male counterparts, which is surely influential as they grow older and either embrace or reject power for themselves.

Another study looked at how scientists are portrayed in the media. Scientists hold quite a lot of authority but, again, this study focused only on the gender differences in the portrayals. The researchers concluded that “the scientist” is simply another position of power in which women are stereotyped and portrayed as unequal to men. Sometimes the woman was portrayed as not being skilled enough to do her work, or her personal life was highlighted rather than her accomplishments, or she was simply “younger and more attractive” than her male counterpart,

placing more value on her looks (Long et al. 359). These are rather common stereotypical portrayals of women and they certainly do not apply solely to this study or the scientific field. However, the potential result of these specific portrayals, similar to the analysis of women's careers in film, is that young female viewers might not pursue a career in the sciences, particularly STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), because of them.

Due to the lack of research regarding stereotypes about people in positions of power (aside from simply considering gender), I am forced to assume that these results would translate to other careers and other groups of people as well. For instance, if a young member of the LBGTQ community saw the media consistently reinforce the idea that straight people held the most power, how might that affect him or her moving forward? One thing can be said for sure: because women scientists are portrayed less often in the media, there are “fewer opportunities for girls’ wishful identification with and social learning from scientist characters” (Long 375). People *need* to see themselves represented in the media, though this is difficult when certain groups receive less screen time or less important roles. According to Hoang Nguyen, “Blacks (49%), Hispanics (49%), and other minorities (58%) say that they frequently see characters like them cast as sidekicks, but not as authority figures” (par. 7). Thus, it is important that research does not focus solely on how gender relates to power because power influences all aspects of life.

Minority characters, such as women or people of color, often reach positions of power only to be stripped of it in some way. A good example of this is the popular television show *Scandal*. The main character, Olivia Pope, is a successful black woman, yet she embodies several common tropes that degrade her character. One trope is the “Jezebel” trope, which says that black women are sexually promiscuous and aggressive. Pope is indeed rather

sexually aggressive, as she “willingly engages in passionate and animalistic relations with the married President Fitz” (Chaney and Robertson 142). Her continual affair with a married white man, and not only that but a man of *much* greater power than herself, lessens her power both as a woman and as a black female. Chaney and Robertson argue that she serves as a “reminder of a harsh historical reality when the bodies of Black women were the property of White men” (143). Therefore, even when the stereotypes are attempted to be broken, such as this case of a black woman being very powerful, it inevitably happens that the power is lessened to some degree or overshadowed by a more traditionally powerful character.

It is also interesting to study how powerful people in the non-fictionalized media (i.e. news, politics, etc.) are portrayed, though again, most studies on this topic focus on how this relates to gender. The political field is perhaps the most interesting to examine because the media portrays men and women politicians quite differently. It is generally accepted that politicians must be ambitious, yet “research suggests that ambition in women remains ideologically problematic” and that powerful women must still be traditionally feminine in order to not offend (Hall and Donaghue 632). Women are expected to be warm, caring and sensitive, which makes it harder for them to achieve success in powerful positions where qualities such as ambition and confidence are usually necessary. This is why people often react negatively to female politicians who “act against stereotypes of women” (Hall and Donaghue 633). Additionally, according to Eagly and Karau, gender is a more noticeable aspect of “female political leaders than male leaders... because of the relative scarcity of women in such positions...” (qtd. in Hall and Donaghue 633). Therefore, when a group is long excluded from power, certain aspects of them immediately become more prominent,

which can work against them in the long run. Thus, this is another reason why it is important for diverse people to be portrayed with power.

Quite clearly, these portrayals of people in power are one-sided and there are various consequences of this. The first is lack of representation. Gender aside, there is a lack of inclusion for different races, ethnicities and sexual orientations in positions of power, which can lead to less opportunities for wishful identification for children. Another consequence is that stereotypes continue to be perpetuated. The woman's career choices in film study found that the images portrayed on film are indeed, "continuing the stereotypes" (Hammer 271). Finally, these gender portrayals can affect men, too. Because women are regularly portrayed as less powerful than men, this can actually cause men to "underestimate the capability of women to succeed in complicated male tasks" (Hetsroni and Lowenstein 377).

Reviewing the existing literature for this topic was rather eye opening. Nearly all of the current research about how the media portrays people in positions of power focuses on gender. It is incredibly important to do more research on this topic and further the body of knowledge because power and authority extend far beyond just gender. Additionally, how the media portrays powerful people can have a great effect on the vulnerable population of children: from what they decide to do with their lives moving forward, to impacting their wishful identification, to how they treat themselves and others. Therefore, it is important to do more research because of the lack of existing research, as well as the large long-term effects these portrayals can have on vulnerable populations.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study was conducted at McLoughlin Middle School for two different eighth-grade classes (group one had 26 students and group two had 16 students). Students were 13 and 14 years old, and altogether there were 23 males and 18 females. We chose this age group for our study because we recognized that children are the most vulnerable group to stereotypes due to lack of media literacy, as well as overall knowledge about stereotypes. Thus, we hoped to teach them what exactly stereotypes are as well as help them realize that the media does not accurately represent what people in positions of power look like.

### **Rationale**

Our chosen method for this study included pre and post surveys, as well as a PowerPoint presentation and discussion. We chose these activities because we felt that they would be best suited for measuring the children's learning while still keeping everything relatively simple. The advantages of doing surveys include being able to directly measure change between the pre and post surveys, as well as being able to collect a lot of data in a short amount of time. The disadvantages might include not being able to read a child's handwriting, or a child misinterpreting or misunderstanding the questions.

### **Logistics**

We secured permission from the school very early in this process. The principal of the school was given a letter requesting permission to conduct the study and it was signed and approved on February 28, 2019 (see Appendix A). After that, we talked with the eighth-grade teacher, Erin Pendergast, about when an appropriate time would be for us to come give our lesson. It was eventually decided that the study would take place on March 22, 2019 from 1:30

p.m. to 3:30 p.m. There were two different eighth-grade classes in Ms. Pendergast's room in that two-hour span and she was more than willing to let us give our lesson to both of her afternoon classes.

## **Procedures**

Both presentations that Anna and I gave were identical in method – the only difference was the amount of discussion the children in each group were willing to have. We began the study by distributing a short pre-survey to the students (see Appendix B). Questions included basic demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity), as well as a question about how many hours of television or movies they watch per day. This was included in order to gauge how much media they consume and thus if they might be more vulnerable to stereotypes. Finally, and most importantly, we asked if they could define what a stereotype was that way we could measure if our lesson had any impact in the end.

The pre-survey also included a photo survey (see Appendix C). We presented the students with a piece of paper with eight photos of professional and formal looking people on it. Four of the photos were women, four were men, and the ethnicities varied. Every person displayed looks as if they could be in a position of power, so the goal for this photo survey was to test the children's biases and preconceived notions of power. The instructions given to the children were as follows: "Please circle the three people that you believe are the most powerful." We gave the children some time to complete both the questionnaire portion and the photo survey before starting the PowerPoint lesson. These surveys, in addition to the post surveys, will help us better understand our hypotheses: 1.) Children will be able to better define what a stereotype is in the second questionnaire, 2.) Children will circle more diverse people in the second photo survey as they will hopefully understand that power is not truly concentrated in white males, and 3.)

Children will circle lower numbers on the post-survey question: “On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being lowest, 10 being highest) how much do you agree with the following statement: ‘I see characters that represent all different kinds of people that can serve as role models in television and movies.’” We believed that children, particularly minorities, would score lower on the post-survey after they learned about the lack of diversity in the media.

We began the presentation by asking the students who their favorite characters from television or movies are, with the hopes of starting a fun discussion to get them engaged. Answers ranged from SpongeBob SquarePants to Jane Hopper from Stranger Things. Next, we shared our favorite characters with the students and explained that we liked these characters because we see parts of ourselves in them and we can relate to them in some way. We acknowledged that all of our favorite characters are white and that people are more likely to relate to characters that look like them. Not only that, but there is a clear oversaturation of white characters in the media, meaning there are more white characters to choose from.

Next, we defined the word ‘stereotype’ and asked the students for examples of stereotypes they had heard before. Many students could readily name common stereotypes, but it was clear that not every student had actually known about the term or why stereotypes can be problematic. The next slide showed pictures of commonly stereotyped powerful people in the media, including Disney men/princes and superheroes (who were all white males, until recently). We followed with a slide that showed pictures of counter-stereotypes (i.e. what it looks like when atypical people are shown in positions of power). Examples included Black Panther (all black cast), Captain Marvel (first leading woman to have her own Marvel superhero movie), Rosa Diaz from Brooklyn 99 (a Latina and bisexual cop), and Arya Stark from Game of Thrones (a fighter rather than a “lady” or princess).

The last few slides discussed the consequences of these one-sided media portrayals and our concluding thoughts for the students. We encouraged them to seek out diverse media and at least *recognize* when media stereotypes groups of people. After we finished, we opened it up for questions or comments.

The last part of our study included giving the children a short post-questionnaire and another photo survey (see Appendices D and E). The post survey asked the children to again define the word stereotype, and the photo survey had the same directions but with different photos (still four men and four women with varying ethnicities).

#### Project Budget

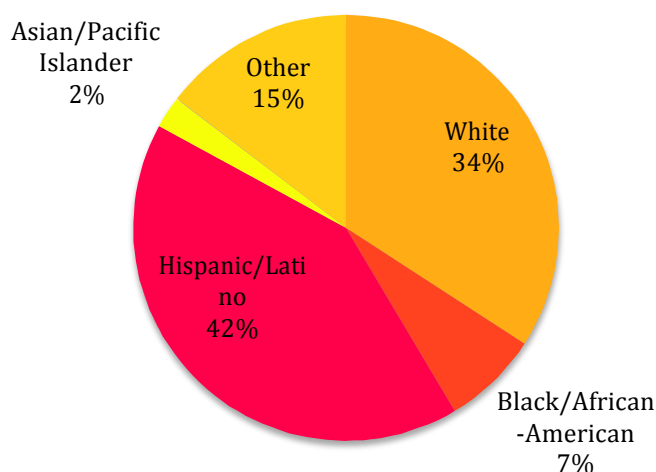
Candy	\$12.99
Starbucks gift card	\$15
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$27.99</b>



## **Results**

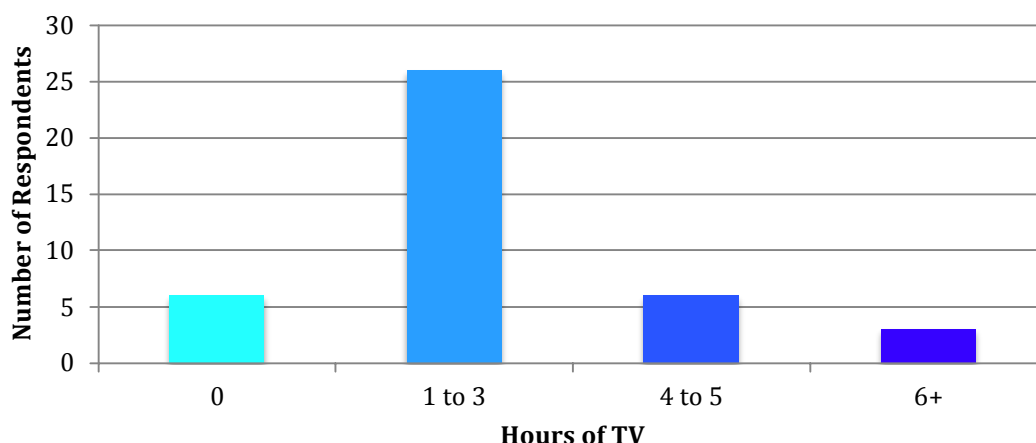
Because our surveys asked the children a variety of questions, we were able to collect quite a bit of data during our research. One participant's responses were thrown out because the answers were written in symbols we did not understand, which left us with 41 respondents. Of that, 23 (56 percent) were male and 18 (44 percent) were female. 17 respondents (41 percent) were 13-years-old, while 24 respondents (59 percent) were 14-years-old. The children represented a range of races: 17 identified as Hispanic/Latino, 14 identified as White, 6 identified as "other," three identified as Black/African-American, and one identified as Asian/Pacific Islander.

### **Races of Students**



The next question asked the children, "How many hours a day do you watch T.V. or movies?" This question was intended to gauge the children's media literacy based on how much (or how little) media they consume. Six children responded zero hours, 26 children responded 1-3 hours, six children responded 4-5 hours, and three children responded with 6+ hours.

## Hours Spent Watching TV Per Day (On Average)



Our next question was more open-ended to get the children thinking about our chosen topic: “Who is the most powerful kind of people displayed on television (for example, are they male or female, etc.)?” The example of male versus female was added as inspiration in case the children were unsure how to answer the question. The answers to this question were harder to quantify, so my research partner and I looked for common themes that emerged. We found that many female children responded that females are the most powerful people displayed on television, while many males found other males to be the most powerful. This is wishful identification, as the children looked up to and aspired to be like characters of the same gender. Four children responded that the most powerful people are those that work for the government or are involved in politics. There were also several notable quotes in response to this question. Some of the male children said: “Mostly white males with a lot of money,” “Usually males as the main character,” “Male Trump,” “Usually males because of how society treats women,” “For me they are usually male,” and “Female artists.” Some of the female children said: “Mostly white males or females,” “I believe both are displayed powerfully but women show it more,” and “Protagonist, people, hero.”

Another pre-survey question was, “Do you believe that certain people have more authority/power based on their jobs?” 33 children (80 percent) responded yes, while seven children (20 percent) responded no; one child did not answer the question. Two notable quotes, both from female students, were: “I believe that anyone can become successful if they allow themselves to do it,” and “Just because of where they work, doesn’t mean they have more or less power.” It is important to note that politics, money, and being a boss all played a role in how the children answered this question.

One of the last questions on the pre-survey was: “Can you define what a stereotype is?” We also asked this question on the post-survey in order to measure how effective our PowerPoint lesson was in teaching the children about stereotypes. Nine children (22 percent) were able to correctly define a stereotype in both the pre and post surveys, while seven children (17 percent) either incorrectly defined a stereotype or circled “no” in the pre-survey and then still got it incorrect in the post-survey. However, the other 25 children (61 percent) comprised the most notable group: those that circled “no” in the beginning, but then correctly defined a stereotype on the post-survey. This supports our hypothesis that more children would be able to correctly define a stereotype on the post-survey versus the pre-survey.

The final question on the pre-survey asked the children: “On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being lowest, 10 being highest) how much do you agree with the following statement: ‘I see characters that resemble me or that I can look up to in television and movies.’” Answers, which are displayed below, varied greatly.

How much respondents agreed	Number of respondents
1	4
2	0
3	3
4	6
5	7

6	6
7	3
8	7
9	0
10	4

Only four students responded with 10 (fully agree), and three of those four students were white males. Most of the Hispanic children were in the middle, answering between four and six.

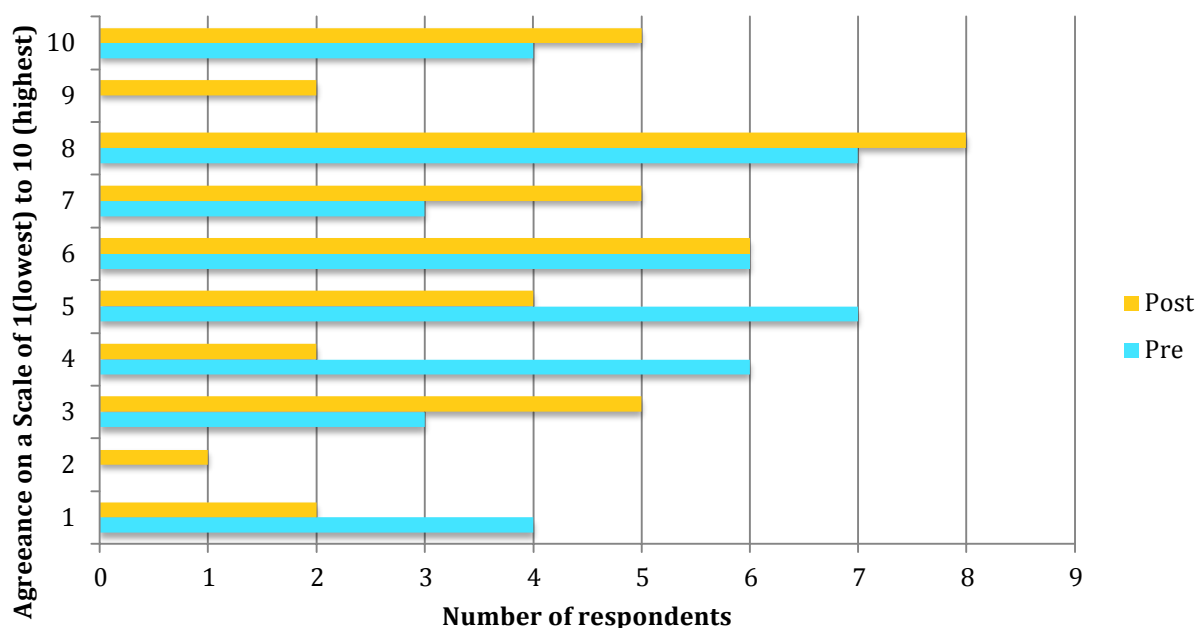
Interestingly, female Hispanic children tended to answer higher than male Hispanic children. The answers of the white female students varied greatly and showed no true pattern.

A similar question was also asked on the post-survey: “On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being lowest, 10 being highest) how much do you agree with the following statement: ‘I see characters that represent all different kinds of people that can serve as role models in television and movies.’” This question was intended to measure how effective our PowerPoint lesson was in helping the children understand the lack of diversity in the media. However, many children answered higher on the post-survey, which means our third hypothesis was not supported.

<b>How much respondents agree</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
1	2
2	1
3	5
4	2
5	4
6	6
7	5
8	8
9	2
10	5

Numbers here vary from the answers to the pre-survey question, and a side-by-side comparison can be seen on the following page. Many students answered higher on the post-survey, which could be because our lesson included examples of “counter-stereotypes,” which may have led the children to see media as more diverse than it truly is.

## Perceived Character Resemblance in Pre vs. Post Surveys



Finally, a photo survey was given to the children as part of the pre and post-surveys. These photo surveys proved to be inconclusive, as students' answers were quite varied. Our hypothesis was that students would circle more women and people of color in the post-survey (as opposed to circling mostly men or white people in the pre-survey), however nearly the opposite occurred. This could potentially be attributed to our talk during our PowerPoint presentation about the overabundance of white people in the media, which may have led students to believe that group to be the most powerful. They would not be wrong in this assumption, but we were still hoping that more diverse people would be circled in the post-survey.

## Discussion

### Findings and Conclusion

From our pre and post-surveys, we discovered that these eighth-grade children watch several hours of television and movies per day. 26 children watch 1-3 hours per day and six children watch 4-5 hours per day. This means that most of the students surveyed are quite immersed in the media. This supports past studies that indicate children as large media consumers. This also highlights why strengthening media literacy skills in children is so important: they are the most susceptible and vulnerable to the negative aspects of media, such as harmful stereotypes and misrepresentation/underrepresentation. The inoculation theory, which suggests that being exposed to a “persuasive attempt” can aid in reducing the “impact of subsequent persuasive attempts,” is important here (qtd. in Scharrer and Ramasubramanian 173). We displayed counter-examples of stereotypes (people in positions of power that are not typically in those roles), with the hopes of dismantling the stereotypes surrounding power and authority, as well as overall improving the children’s media literacy.

Based on answers from pre-survey questions, we learned that our participants already seemed to understand, to a point, the disparity in how people in positions of power (or people without power) are displayed in the media. When asked to describe the most powerful kind of person displayed on television, the children generally responded with answers that indicated wishful identification. For instance, many females found fellow females to be the most powerful, while many males found other males to hold the most power. One male even seemed to acknowledge his wishful identification, writing, “**For me** they are usually male.” This is wishful identification because people tend to look up to and relate with characters that look and/or act like them. Lack of representation for minority children, especially that of characters in positions

of power, is incredibly harmful to those children's ability to connect with and aspire to be like the characters they see on the screen. Without role models, minority children, and even females, may feel as though they cannot achieve the same level of success and power as their white and male counterparts.

The children also grasped that certain positions/jobs hold more power than others. 80 percent stated that people have more authority/power based on their jobs. Specifically, people working in government or politics, as well as bosses and those with a lot of money, were deemed the most powerful by the children. Given the children's prior basic level of understanding, the main goal of the PowerPoint lesson was to help them better understand and define stereotypes, as well as reinforce the idea that the media is not representative of real life.

As far as teaching the students about stereotypes, our research was successful. We asked the children to define what a stereotype was on both the pre and post-surveys in order to gauge their learning and how effective our lesson was. While 22 percent of the children were able to correctly define a stereotype on both the pre and post-surveys, our lesson was likely effective in reinforcing the implications of such stereotypes and underrepresentation in the media. 17 percent were unable to define a stereotype on both the pre and post-survey, which could indicate lack of interest or focus, or misunderstanding of directions. Most notably, however, was that 61 percent of the children were not able to define a stereotype on the pre-survey but could define it on the post-survey. This supports our hypothesis that more students would be able to correctly define a stereotype on the post-survey versus the pre-survey. This also indicates that children's brains are malleable and therefore responsive to media literacy lessons such as this one. Finally, it became clear to us that many children were familiar with popular stereotypes, but they were unaware of

the word ‘stereotype’ or the implications of using them. Our lesson helped clarify the term and the abundance of stereotypes in the media.

Overall, this is an important topic to study not only because there is a lack of research on how the media portrays people in positions of power and the effect this has on children, but also because this topic can be applied to children all over the world. Media literacy, stereotypes, and lack of media representation: these are all subjects that children need to learn about in order to combat harmful stereotypes and misrepresentation by the media. Further research is necessary to truly understand the consequences on children of how people in positions of power are portrayed.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The biggest limitation of this study was the photo survey. One of our hypotheses was that the children would circle more diverse people in the second photo survey (after our presentation) after they gained an understanding that power does not belong solely to white people, males or white males. However, our presentation might have highlighted how oversaturated white characters are in the media, and how power is most often given to white people, males and white males. Thus, the children circled more white people and more men in the post photo survey than in the pre photo survey. If other researchers attempt a photo survey in the future, it is recommended that clearer instructions be given, especially if they are working with young people. Additionally, surveying different age groups might be helpful because it is likely that these young 13 and 14-year-olds were simply circling photos at random. If we were to revise our hypothesis, it would read: “Children will circle more white people and males in the second photo survey as they will hopefully realize that the media disproportionately displays those groups of people with the most power.”



Another slight limitation of the study was the age of the children. The study was conducted on a Friday afternoon and the children were slightly restless and perhaps not as focused as we would have preferred. However, even despite this, children of this age were ideal for our study because they are still young, diverse and able to learn and change perceptions about stereotypes and media representation.

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**Appendix A**

February 28, 2019  
Mr. Travis Boeh  
Head of McLoughlin Middle School

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study<sup>1</sup>

Dear Mr. Boeh:

My research partner and I are writing to request permission to conduct a research study at McLoughlin Middle School. We are currently enrolled in the Murrow College of Communications at Washington State University Vancouver, and are in the process of completing our Capstone projects. The study is about how stereotypical portrayals of powerful people in the media affect younger children.

Our hope is to visit Erin Pendergast's classroom and interview her students about media stereotypes and perceptions. We will mix standard interview questions with interactive activities. Students will remain anonymous, but demographic information may be noted. No costs will be incurred by either your school/center or the individual participants.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to email either myself ([Sydnie.kobza@wsu.edu](mailto:Sydnie.kobza@wsu.edu)) or my research partner, Anna Nelson ([anna.k.nelson@wsu.edu](mailto:anna.k.nelson@wsu.edu)).

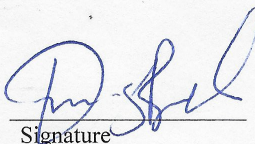
If you agree, kindly sign below and Anita Kobza can retrieve the paper from you.

Sincerely,  
Sydnie Kobza and Anna Nelson

Approved by:

Travis Boeh

Print your name and title here

  
Signature

2/28/19  
Date

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<sup>1</sup> This form was taken and adapted from Notre Dame University  
(<https://www.ndnu.edu/academics/research/permission-to-conduct-study/>)

## **Appendix B**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Ethnicity:**

-White                      -Black/African-American                      -Hispanic/Latino  
 -Asian/Pacific Islander                      -Native American/American Indian                      -Other

**Mom's Occupation:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Dad's Occupation:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Did either of your parents attend college?**

-Mom attended college                      -Dad attended college                      -Both                      -Neither

**How many hours a day do you watch T.V. or movies?**

-0                      -1-3                      -4-5                      -6+

**Who is the most powerful kind of people displayed on television (for example, are they male or female, etc.)?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Do you believe that certain people have more authority/power based on their jobs?**

-Yes    -No    -Other (Explain) \_\_\_\_\_

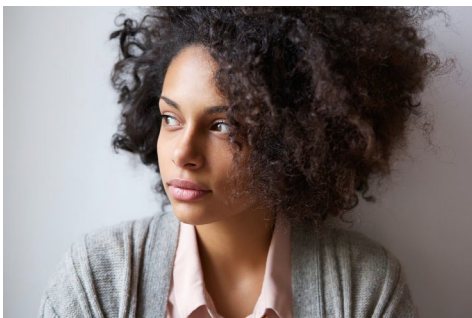
**Can you define what a stereotype is?**

-Yes, it is: \_\_\_\_\_

-No

**On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being lowest, 10 being highest) how much do you agree with the following statement: "I see characters that resemble me or that I can look up to in television and movies."**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

**Appendix C**

**Appendix D**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Define what a stereotype is:** \_\_\_\_\_

**On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being lowest, 10 being highest) how much do you agree with the following statement: “I see characters that represent all different kinds of people that can serve as role models in television and movies.”**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10



**Appendix E**