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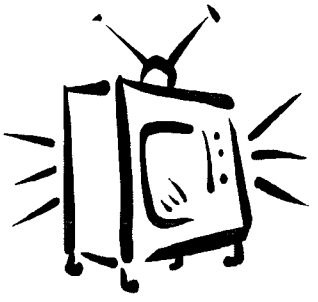
ABSTRACT

Children understand that media grant recognition and respect to racial groups that are positively portrayed. Approximately half of the programs in the 1999-2000 broadcast prime time entertainment programming exhibited some diversity in their opening credits casts. This study examined the nature of the portrayals of diversity. The study examined 10 "mixed" programs (character set included a mix of racial and ethnic characters) and 10 "only one" programs (all characters but one in program character set belong to the same racial group). Two additional programs with predominantly African American casts were selected for comparison. The first three episodes were recorded for each program and coded. Among the major findings are the following: (1) African American characters overall were more likely to be integral to primary storylines in situation comedies than in dramas; (2) Asian Pacific American characters were seen the least frequently; (3) the few Latino characters were more often integral to secondary dramatic storylines than to primary ones; (4) characters of different races frequently interacted professionally, sometimes socially, rarely romantically; (5) many shows adopted a colorblind approach to interracial interactions, with the exception to colorblind portrayals being racial humor and stereotyping by characters of one race toward characters of another; (6) much of the racial humor and stereotyping targeted Asian Pacific Americans and Latinos; (7) characters of color tended to be shown at work/school or home, whereas white characters were shown in both environments; (8) nonwhite characters, particularly African Americans, were likely to be portrayed as successful, good, and competent, whereas white characters were more likely than nonwhite to be shown as unsuccessful, bad, or incompetent; and (9) programs featured many African American characters that could be positive role models for viewers. (KB)

FALL COLORS II

EXPLORING THE QUALITY OF DIVERSE PORTRAYALS ON PRIME TIME TELEVISION



Children Now
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STORYLINE INVOLVEMENT

- African American characters overall are more likely to be integral to primary storylines in situation comedies than in dramas.
- Asian Pacific American characters are seen the least frequently, with one show accounting for four of the six in a primary dramatic storyline.
- The few Latino characters on prime time were more often integral to secondary, rather than primary dramatic storylines.

INTERRACIAL INTERACTION

- Characters of different races frequently interact professionally, sometimes interact socially, but rarely are romantically involved.

ACKNOWLEDGING RACE & RACIAL DIFFERENCES

- Many shows do not acknowledge racial differences, instead adopting a colorblind approach to interracial interactions.

HUMOR & STEREOTYPES

- The exception to colorblind portrayals of interracial interaction is racial humor and stereotyping by characters of one race toward characters of another race.
- Much of the racial humor and stereotyping targeted Asian Pacific Americans and Latinos.

CHARACTER ENVIRONMENTS

- Characters of color tended to be shown either at work/school or home, while white characters were shown in both environments.
- Three fourths of African American characters were never shown at home.

POSITIVE PORTRAYALS

- Nonwhite characters, particularly African Americans, were likely to be portrayed as successful, good, and competent.
- White characters, by comparison, were more likely than nonwhite characters to be unsuccessful, bad, or incompetent.
- Prime time television programs featured many African American characters that could be positive role models for viewers.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2000, Children Now released its comprehensive quantitative analysis of diversity in the 1999-2000 broadcast prime time entertainment programming. Titled *Fall Colors, How Diverse is the 1999-2000 Prime Time Season?*, the report detailed the under-representation of nonwhite characters in primary recurring roles. Programs were rated on a Program Diversity Index (PDI) for the level of diversity in their casts and were labeled according to the following definitions:

PROGRAM DIVERSITY INDEX	*Description*
All White	All characters in the Program Character Set identified racially as "white"
All Black	All characters in the Program Character Set identified racially as "African American"
Only 1	All characters in the Program Character Set but one belonging to the same racial group
Mixed	Program Character Set includes a mix of racial and ethnic characters that is not all white, all Black, nor Only 1*

* Note: In the case of a Program Character Set with only two characters, each of a different race, the Set is designated Mixed rather than Only 1.

Children Now discovered that a majority of prime time programs were classified as *mixed* when entire casts of characters were considered. When the analysis was narrowed to include the opening credits cast only, nearly half of the shows on prime time were shown to have *all white* casts. Clearly, then, much of the diversity found in prime time programs came from non-recurring or guest characters in programs where the regularly appearing characters were overwhelmingly white.

Still, approximately half of the programs in the prime time line-up exhibited some level of diversity in their opening credits casts. But what is the nature of the portrayals of diversity on prime time? Do white characters and characters of color participate equally in story lines? Do white and non-white characters interact professionally? Socially? Romantically? Do the characters address racial difference explicitly? Which minority characters are most vulnerable to racist humor or stereotyping? How does the treatment and portrayals of each minority group differ? Which characters of color are presented as good, competent, problem-solvers or as role models?

Research has shown that both the *quantity* and the *quality* of representation are important when considering potential social learning impacts of entertainment.[1] That is, while mere inclusion has been shown to positively impact the attitudes and self esteem of nonwhite viewers, consistent negative messages can have an adverse effect.[2]

Entertainment images also send important messages about the values of the culture that produces them. Cultural beliefs about the value and/or role of different groups in U.S. society are reflected in American popular culture. Again, the *quantity* and *quality* of representation may signal the cultural importance of different racial groups.

What kinds of messages do these qualitative representations send to children, who consume about 20 hours per week of television? Children understand that media grants recognition and respect to racial groups that are positively portrayed. Yet when children of color do not see members of their racial group on television, it "suggests that they are not worthy of viewers' respect."[3]With the changes in racial demographics and the steady influence of television in children's lives, an examination of racial diversity on television, particularly qualitative representations, is increasingly important.

[1] Greenberg, 1988.
[2] Huston et. al., 1992.
[3] Children Now, *A Different World: Children's Perceptions of Race and Class in the Media*, 1998.

METHODOLOGY

Recognizing TV's role as both a reflection and an influence, Children Now took the next step in its examination of diversity in the 1999-2000 season. To move beyond discussion of overall inclusion, Children Now selected a subset of programs from the 1999-2000 season to examine further. Twenty programs with some level of diversity in primary recurring casts were selected for further analysis. Ten programs previously labeled *mixed* and ten programs identified as *only one* were chosen. Program selection was not random; rather, selections were based on genre and network to assure variety in the sample. In addition to these twenty programs, two programs with predominantly African American casts were selected for inclusion and comparison: *Moesha,* (UPN—labeled *all black* in *Fall Colors*) and *City of Angels* (CBS).

The following programs were included in this analysis:

Ally McBeal (Fox)
Becker (CBS)
Beverly Hills, 90210 (Fox)
City of Angels (CBS)
ER (NBC)
Felicity (WB)
For Your Love (WB)
Grown Ups (UPN)
The Hughleys (ABC)
Judging Amy (CBS)
Law and Order (NBC)
Martial Law (CBS)
Moesha (UPN)
Popular (WB)
Spin City (ABC)
Star Trek: Voyager (UPN)
Suddenly Susan (NBC)
That 70's Show (Fox)
The Practice (ABC)
Time of Your Life (Fox)
Walker, Texas Ranger (CBS)

The first three episodes of the Fall 1999 season were recorded for each program.[4] All programs were viewed and analyzed by the author, Katharine Heintz-Knowles, Ph.D., and one other trained coder, using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Overall, 406 characters were examined in the study: 271 whites; 95 African Americans; 16 Latinos; 14 Asian Americans; and 10 characters coded as "other." Each primary and secondary character was described using a quantitative coding instrument designed to capture such information as character's problems and problem-solving behaviors in the episodes, character's time spent in different activities, or his/her professional status. In addition, coders prepared qualitative assessments of each nonwhite character in each program, looking for commonalities among characters across the sample.

To ensure reliability between coders, programs not included in this sample were coded independently. The percent of agreement between coders was calculated. All quantitative variables included in this analysis received a level of agreement of at least 92%.

It is important to recognize that each of the programs included in this analysis have made some commitment to diversity. Each program contains at least one character who is not of the same race as the primary racial group. Thus, this sample offers the opportunity to examine how programs with some level of diversity move beyond the initial step of inclusion.

[4] *City of Angels* did not premiere until January 2000, so program episodes were recorded in that month.

STORYLINE INVOLVEMENT

Key Findings

- *African American characters overall were more likely to be integral to primary story lines in situation comedies than in dramas.*
- *Asian Pacific American characters were seen the least frequently, with one show accounting for four of the six in a primary dramatic storyline.*
- *The few Latino characters were more often integral to secondary dramatic storylines.*

In *Fall Colors,* Children Now documented the lack of color on prime time, noting that actors of color playing guest roles or non-recurring characters accounted for much of prime time programming's racial diversity. Yet when audiences see recurring characters of color, how central are they to the story lines of dramas and sitcoms? And how do these portrayals vary among racial groups, and by gender and genre?

Fall Colors II examined 406 characters: 271 whites; 95 African Americans (AA); 16 Latinos; 14 Asian Pacific Americans (APA), 1 Native American (NA), and 9 characters coded as "other" to determine how central these characters were to storylines in dramas and sitcoms.

TABLE 1: Characters' Importance to Dramatic Storylines by Gender and Race

	Primary Character	Secondary Character	Non-essential	Total
AA Male	18	7	7	32
AA Female	6	12	5	23
APA Male	3	2	3	8
APA Female	1	1	3	5
Latino	3	3	2	8
Latina	1	3	2	6
NA Male	1	0	0	0
NA Female	0	0	0	0

TABLE 2: Characters' Importance to Sitcom Storylines by Gender and Race

	Primary	Secondary	Non-essential	Total
AA Male	14	4	4	22
AA Female	8	4	6	18
APA Male	0	0	0	0
APA Female	1	0	0	1
Latino	0	1	0	1
Latina	0	0	0	0
NA Male	0	0	0	0
NA Female	0	0	0	0

African Americans

Although African American characters appeared with greater frequency in dramatic programming (58%) than situation comedies (42%), they were more likely to be featured in primary story lines in situation comedies (55%) than in dramas (44%). African American males, especially, were integral to primary dramatic story lines, while African American females were nearly twice as likely to be integral to secondary dramatic story lines or to be non-essential to the story line.

For example, on *ER* (NBC), a recurring secondary story line involved Physician's Assistant Jeannie Boulet's attempts to treat, and eventually become a foster parent for, a Latino baby with HIV whose mother died of a drug overdose. On *Suddenly Susan* (NBC), Miranda, an African American secretary for Susan's boss, was not essential to the story lines of any of the three episodes studied. She appeared frequently, but was often shown ridiculing Susan or making sexual remarks to male staffers.

Asian Pacific Americans

Of the 14 Asian Pacific American characters in the sample, only five were central to the storyline, and they were more likely to be featured in dramas. Four of the five primary characters were seen on the CBS series *Martial Law*, in which two Chinese detectives team up with a white and an African American detective to work undercover to fight crime in Los Angeles. In one episode, the detectives fought two Asian Pacific American assassins. The only other primary Asian Pacific American character, Ling, appeared in *Ally McBeal* (Fox).

Latinos

Latinos were most likely to be featured in secondary story lines in dramatic programming, with half of the sample falling into this category. In one episode of City of Angels (CBS), for example, a secondary story line developed around Supervisor Guerrero's admission to his boss that he had started using drugs again and was caught with a prostitute the previous night. On The WB's Popular, Lilly, a Latina high school sophomore, engaged in a power struggle with her biology teacher over her refusal to dissect a frog. While the primary story line revolved around the disparity between the "popular" crowd and others at Kennedy High School, this secondary story line carried across two episodes.

INTERRACIAL INTERACTION

Key Finding

- *Characters of different races frequently interact professionally, sometimes interact socially, but rarely are romantically involved.*

How often are people of different races portrayed as professional colleagues like Detectives Greene (African American) and Briscoe (white) on *Law and Order*? Do they generally socialize like Fez, a Latino exchange student, and his white high school buddies on *That 70's Show*? And when do we see people of different races romantically involved, like Ling (Asian Pacific American) and Richard (white) on *Ally McBeal*?

In order to determine how characters of different races related to each other, each character in *Fall Colors II* was analyzed to determine with whom he or she interacted—professionally, socially, and romantically. While the majority of characters (67%) overall engaged in at least one conversation with someone of another race, there were substantial differences in their professional, social, and romantic interactions.

Professional Interactions

Characters of color more frequently engaged in conversations with someone of another race, especially in dramatic programs, where they were much more likely to initiate these conversations. For example, on *The Practice* (ABC), Eugene, an African American lawyer, counseled his white colleague, Jimmy, not to violate attorney-client privilege, even if it meant helping Eugene's client. On one episode of *Star Trek: Voyager* (UPN), Chakotay, a Native American Star Fleet First Officer, questioned the strategies of his white boss, Captain Janeway, when she appeared to be letting her personal feelings cloud her professional judgment.

Several programs also featured interracial professional partnerships: Attorneys Renee Radick (African American) and Whipper Cone (white) on *Ally McBeal* (Fox); Rangers Cordell Walker (white), Jimmy Trevet (African American), Gage (white) and Sydney Cooke (Latino) on *Walker, Texas Ranger* (CBS); Detectives Sammo (Chinese) and Tyrell (African American) on *Martial Law* (CBS).

Social Relationships

One third of all of the characters in the study were shown socializing (n=136), the majority of whom (69%) interacted in groups that included people of their own and other races. For example, at the end of each episode of *Ally McBeal* (Fox), the multi-racial group of lawyers visited a favorite bar where they were shown eating, drinking, and dancing together. Similarly, at the end of each *Walker, Texas Ranger* episode, the four Texas Rangers and District Attorney Alex Cahill met at CD's bar to unwind over a meal and jokes. On *Felicity*

(WB), African American student Elena was shown in several scenes socializing with her white friends.

Romance & Intimacy

While popular television shows like *I Love Lucy*, *The Jeffersons*, and *ER* have featured interracial couples, prime time television overall has not portrayed many interracial romantic relationships. While audiences have seen an increase in interracial couples over the last few years on shows including *Suddenly Susan*, *Time of Your Life*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Ally McBeal*, *City of Angels*, and *Voyager,* the numbers are still low overall.

Across the shows examined in *Fall Colors II*, same-race romance was most common, especially for primary characters and those in situation comedies. Only fourteen percent of characters in romantic relationships (9 couples) were shown with someone from another race.

Interracial romance was most frequent on dramatic programs, although it was not the source of dramatic tension in any of the programs. For example, on *Beverly Hills 90210* (Fox), Janet Sosna (Asian Pacific American) was involved in a serious relationship with Steve Sanders (white), and they discussed what to do about her unplanned pregnancy. Three different interracial couples appeared on one episode of *City of Angels* (CBS). First, Dr. Geoffrey Weiss (white) and Nurse Grace Patterson (African American) were shown having a first date. In that same episode, a gay couple came to the emergency room for treatment, one partner was African American and the other was white. Finally, Dr. Dan Prince (white) was shown undressing Nurse Vanessa Modino (Latino) after she lied for him to his supervisor.

ACKNOWLEDGING RACE & RACIAL DIFFERENCES

Key Findings

- *Many shows adopt a colorblind approach to interracial interactions.*

As detailed in *Fall Colors*, there are plenty of prime time television shows that feature homogenous casts of main characters. Tuning into these programs week after week, viewers may find a lack of any interracial interaction whatsoever. By contrast, the prime time programs in this sample present main characters of different races interacting and relating to one another. All of the selected programs in *Fall Colors II* featured multi-racial casts of characters. While some programs were more diverse than others, each program featured at least one character who was of a different race from the rest of the cast.

Yet how is this significant amount of interracial interaction presented? Do characters of different backgrounds find themselves analyzing or struggling with complicated issues of race relations? Are tensions between people of color and whites portrayed in realistic ways? Do these shows present an idealistic society that elides difficult questions about race?

In most of the programs surveyed, racial difference went unnoticed by the characters. On the 1999-2000 small screen, whites, African Americans, Asian Pacific Americans, and Latinos worked, played, and loved without much discussion of the racial differences between them.

Last year, a debate was sparked by the interracial romance on *Ally McBeal* between the white protagonist (Calista Flockhart as Ally McBeal) and an African American doctor (Jesse Martin as Greg Butters). Said David E. Kelley, creator of the hit series *Ally McBeal,*

> We are a consciously colorblind show. In the history of the show, we have never addressed race. The reason is simple. In my naïve dream, I wish that the world could be like this. Ally lives in a fanciful and whimsical world, there is not going to be any racial differences or tensions. All people are one under the sun.[5]

Colorblind portrayals such as these have ignited heated discussions on whether or not prime time television accurately depicts society's progress regarding race relations. For some, the picture of a colorblind society presents viewers with a goal, an endpoint for which people should be reaching. For others, the adage that we must first consider race to get beyond race[6] applies and there is a danger in allowing viewers to believe that racial difference—as well as inequitable conditions—is no longer a significant issue.

Programs Dealing with Race

Only three of the programs in this sample had episodes dealing explicitly with issues of race and racial differences: *ER, City of Angels,* and *Star Trek: Voyager.* While this number

[5] Greg Braxton, *"Colorblind or Just Plain Blind,"* Los Angeles Times, February 9, 1999 at F1.
[6] *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke,* 438 US 265 (1978).

appears significantly small in a sample that features extensive multi-racial casting, it is also important to consider that one program, *Star Trek: Voyager,* is set in the realm of non-humans—an environment that television shows may use to explore controversial identity themes such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. Given these conditions, as few as two shows in the entire sample addressed race in a realistic setting.

ER

On *ER* (NBC), racial issues were addressed in one episode with two separate storylines. First, physician's assistant Jeannie Boulet attempted to become a foster parent for an HIV-positive Latino baby. As an African American woman, she wondered if her race would become an issue in the adoption process. Second, supporting character Carla and her estranged partner Dr. Peter Benton, both African American, submitted to discussion with a family therapist to facilitate their custody dispute over their son, Reese. During the session, Carla made a cutting, directed remark to Peter about his interracial romantic relationship with Dr. Elizabeth Corday, a white woman.

City of Angels

All three episodes from the drama *City of Angels* (CBS) dealt explicitly with racial difference. On this show, racial difference was more often a source of tension and conflict than a source of humor. For example, in the first episode of *City of Angels* (CBS), Charles Johnson, an African American patient, referred to Dr. Weiss as "Palisades Jew Boy," and introduced himself to the doctor, saying, "Palisades, nice to meet you. I'm a black man!" In a later episode, Dr. Weiss noticed dry patches on an African American child's legs. He called two female African American doctors to consult on what he thought was a potentially fatal rash. The consulting doctors get a good laugh at his misdiagnosis of ash, a dry skin problem common among African Americans. The patient said to Dr. Weiss: "It's a black thing." Overall, having a white Jewish man (Dr. Weiss) in a primarily black inner-city hospital set the stage for a series of discussions between Dr. Weiss and his African American colleagues about prejudice and racism.

In another story line running through two of the episodes, race was made an issue in the selection of a new chief of surgery for the hospital. Two surgeons—one white (Dr. Prince) and one black (Dr. Irvin)—competed for the position. Each candidate mentioned that his race should be taken into consideration in the decision-making process. Dr. Prince called for a shake up of the current power structure and argues that it would be progressive for the black-run hospital to hire a white chief of surgery. Dr. Irvin, in turn, encouraged the Chief of Staff to maintain the integrity of the black administration and hire him. No decision was made during the sample time period.

The issue of racial prejudice in this program was not limited to interracial incidents. In a story line that carried through two of the episodes coded, Dr. Williams, a black surgical resident, was shown being overwhelmed by a particularly busy night in the E.R. A police officer informed him that the local gangs were busy that night, so when a young, black gun shot victim is brought in, he assumed the victim is a gang member. He had to decide which of his patients to send up to surgery, and he chose a less

critical patient over the gun shot victim, saying, "Let's give him time to think about his lifestyle choices." When he discovered the next day that the gun shot victim is a resident in the same hospital, Dr. Williams has to confront his own prejudice and deal with the anger of the patient.

Star Trek: Voyager

Star Trek: Voyager (UPN) used a diverse cast of humans and non-humans to explore issues of difference. In one episode, the issue of cultural difference was celebrated. B'Elanna, whose parents are Klingon and human, was shown coming to terms with a heritage she had rejected and denigrated. When her mother (Klingon) needed her help, B'Elanna set aside her hatred of Klingon culture and immersed herself in its study. The crew of the Voyager supported her in her pursuit, even arranging a party to celebrate the "great Klingon Empire." In the end, B'Elanna saved her mother and accepted her mixed heritage. In another episode, the character Seven of Nine dealt with her identity as a Borg, when others of the Borg collective came to her for help.

Both storylines on *Star Trek: Voyager* involved characters whose "racial" identity and level of hatred must be addressed, analyzed, and resolved in some fashion. Notably, this plot arc was used exclusively in a science fiction program.

HUMOR & STEREOTYPES

Key Findings

- *The exception to colorblind portrayals of interracial interaction was racial humor and stereotyping by characters of one race to characters of another race.*
- *Much of the racial humor and stereotyping targeted Asian Pacific Americans and Latinos.*

The significant exception to colorblind portrayals of interracial interaction was humor. In particular, when the sampled shows did discuss race, it was often done through ridiculing racial minorities. While these shows avoided serious discussions of racial difference or the complexities of racial identity, they contained substantial examples of using racial difference for humorous effect.

Humorous plot devices, jokes, and level of stereotyping varied with each particular minority group. Perhaps most startling was the difference in the treatment of African Americans and of other minorities with respect to interracial racist humor. While explicit teasing of and negative stereotyping of African Americans by non-African Americans was largely absent in the sample, other minority characters were especially vulnerable to being the target of racist humor by characters of other races. These minorities were groups more akin to recent immigrants such as Asian Pacific Americans and Latinos. In several programs, characters from these racial groups were treated as curiosities and in need of education about the "American way of doing things."

African Americans

The Hughleys & Spin City

Black-white humor was common on African American sitcoms such as *The Hughleys* (ABC). This humor is most often tied to class situations—pointing out differences between the inner city, where the Hughley family used to live, and the suburbs where they now reside. In one episode about the dangers of having handguns in houses with children, Daryl Hughley comments that he's glad he owns a handgun because he knows "Ozzie and Harriet are strapped."

In an episode of *Spin City* (ABC), Mike decides to break into the Mayor's office to copy some files a new employee is collecting on all the staff. Mike enlists the help of his colleagues Carter (an African American male) and Stuart (a white male). When asked to help, Carter responds: "I see... a break in, get a black man to help. Black people know all about committing crimes." Later in the same episode, when it looks as if they might get caught, Stuart says to Carter, "You're the one with the incentive to get caught. Prison is like summer camp to you people." This episode of *Spin City* presented the rare instance of a non-African American ridiculing an African American (i.e., interracial racist humor).

Asian Pacific Americans

Martial Law & *Ally McBeal*

As detailed in *Fall Colors I* and *II,* the portrayals of Asian Pacific Americans on prime time television are both scarce and problematic. The few representations of Asians on the small screen are often stereotyped, lacking any depth or development. Historically offensive archetypes such as the nerdy student, the inscrutable martial arts master, the seductive and dangerous Dragon Lady, and the clueless immigrant abound on television.

On *Martial Law* (CBS), Detective Sammo (a Chinese national) is regarded by Tyrell (an African American male) and Amy (a white female) as a curiosity. In one episode, Amy asks Tyrell to interpret Sammo's response to her, and Tyrell replies: "If I spent all my time trying to understand Chinese emotional responses, I'd never get my job done." He proceeds to show Amy a "trick" Sammo performs: "Have you ever noticed how Sammo responds when you say, 'Thank you?'" he asks Amy. "Check this out..." Then, to Sammo: "Hey Sammo, would you hand me that folder please." After Sammo brings the folder and Tyrell thanks him, Sammo turns away saying, "No, no, no." Wide-eyed Amy smiles and responds, "I can't believe I never noticed that before... I want to try!" She asks Sammo to bring her coffee over, but he doesn't "perform" the "thank you trick" for her and Tyrell scolds, "Now look what you've done!" as if she has somehow ruined their game. At the end of the episode, Amy thanks Sammo for his hard work in the case and he replies, "You're very welcome. See, I can do it the American way, too." They all laugh.

Among the programs that have made a conscious commitment to racial diversity in casting, there was not a great deal of stereotyping. However, even in these programs, there were characters who fit classic racial stereotypes. A character who has received substantial criticism is Ling on *Ally McBeal* (Fox). Ling conforms to the classic Asian "Dragon Lady" stereotype. She is shown as extremely sexual, but potentially dangerous. She is cold, especially in her interactions with other women, and calculating with her sexuality. Another "Dragon Lady" portrayal appeared on *Martial Law* (CBS). Grace, an Asian American undercover detective, is shown as cold with her female boss and her male pursuer, but dresses in a way to reveal her sexuality. For example, in the opening credits sequence, she was shown in a bikini; at work, she wore tight black pants and tight t-shirts.

Latinos

Suddenly Susan & *That 70's Show*

The Latino characters in the sample faced similar challenges as the Asian Pacific American characters. The relatively small number of Latinos on the small screen represent several stereotypes and were the subject of insulting jokes based on their race. For example, the use of the term "tamale" to address an El Salvadoran maid character in the season premiere of *Will & Grace* (NBC) sparked a national debate and a boycott by Latino activists.[7] NBC initially revised the episode by removing the

[7] Gregory M. Lamb, "Is TV Diverse? Spin the Numbers," *The Christian Science Monitor,* September 24, 1999, Arts & Leisure, p.13.

term, and then re-inserted the term when the show was rerun.

On *That 70's Show* (Fox), Fez, a Latino foreign exchange student displayed a lack of knowledge about American culture which was a frequent source of humor for the program. In one episode, Fez is shown playing poker with the guys in Eric Foreman's basement. Unlike the others, however, Fez is only in his underwear. It is clear the guys have lied to Fez about how the game is played. When Donna walks in on the game and asks why Fez isn't dressed, he replies, "it's really a crazy story." All of the guys laugh.

In an episode of *Suddenly Susan* (NBC), Ian, the British born magazine editor, refers to staffer Luis as "the Puerto Rican fellow" until his secretary interrupts: "Cuban! Cuban!" at which point he corrects himself: "Maybe the Cuban fellow can take the staff photographs..."

These two Latino males also conformed to the "Latin lover" stereotype. Fez on *That 70's Show* (Fox) was shown as obsessed with sex. Nearly all of his conversation and behavior in the sample episodes were related to sexual conquest. In one episode, he convinced a bouncer at a disco to let him in because he felt "the hot rhythm of disco" burning in his loins. In another episode, Fez kissed his friend's girlfriend because he was convinced she "wants the old boy."

Luis, a photographer on *Suddenly Susan* (NBC), was also shown as a Latin lover. In the first episode, his girlfriend broke up with him because he was "too good to her." She claimed that all his "caring and foot rubs and cooking" were destroying her. He offered to get counseling to learn to be more abusive. In another episode he criticized the lighting in sex shops and then claimed, "Or so I've heard..."

CHARACTER ENVIRONMENTS—WORK OR HOME?

Key Findings

- *Characters of color were not as well-developed as white characters; they tended to be shown either at work/school or home, while white characters were shown in both environments.*

- *Three fourths of African American characters were never shown at home.*

Prime time characters become well-developed when audiences see them in a variety of settings—at home, work, school, and in public places—and in a range of roles, as professionals, family members, and significant others. For example, audiences understand the complexities of Dr. Mark Greene on *ER* when they see him at work in the hospital and at home caring for his ailing father.

Research shows that children get messages about their race by seeing how its members are portrayed in the media.[8] When characters of color are portrayed only at work, it sends a message that they are not important enough to follow home. Such limited character portrayals can create an impression that these characters don't have multi-dimensional lives, and a range of professional and personal experiences, making it harder for viewers to identify with them.

Fall Colors II found that while characters of color were featured as primary characters in situation comedies and dramas, they were not as well-developed as their white counterparts. They had much more limited portrayals, as they were more likely to be shown engaged in just one aspect of their lives (i.e. either home or work/school, but not both environments). White characters, on the other hand, were commonly portrayed at work/school, at home, and in public spaces. Such limited portrayals of characters of color leave the audience with an incomplete picture of their lives.

The majority of characters of color were shown exclusively in the workplace or at school, and the majority of these portrayals were found in dramatic programming. Some of these depictions could be attributed to the nature of television programming, as most of the shows in the sample were workplace-oriented. However, even work-related programs like *ER, Sports Night*, and *Spin City* featured scenes in which the personal lives of primary characters were developed through their interactions at home or in public places. Overall, white characters were more likely than non-white characters to be shown in multiple locations.

African Americans

Three fourths of African American characters (76%) were *never* shown at home; they were seen mostly in the workplace. Those characters who were shown at home were found

[8] *A Different World: Children's Perceptions of Race and Class in the Media*, Children Now, 1998.

predominantly in situation comedies (74%), especially those targeting African American audiences (*The Hughleys, For Your Love, Grown Ups, Moesha*). On African American targeted sitcoms, African American characters were shown primarily at home, with nearly 60% never being shown at work.

For example, on *Moesha* (UPN), Frank Mitchell (African American), Moesha's father, owns a Saturn car dealership, yet his on-screen time was exclusively in the home. And in the three episodes of *Spin City* (ABC): Mike Flaherty (white) was shown at his office, at Yankee Stadium, and in his apartment, while Carter Heywood (African American) was shown exclusively in the office.

Asian Pacific Americans & Latinos

Asian Pacific American and Latino characters on prime time were the least developed of all characters of color. No Asian Pacific American or Latino characters in situation comedies were *ever* shown at home. Only one character from each of these racial groups was shown at home in a dramatic program: Janet Sosna, an Asian Pacific American on *Beverly Hills 90210*, and Bryan, a Latino on *Felicity*.

POSITIVE PORTRAYALS

Key Findings

- *Nonwhite characters, particularly African Americans, were likely to be portrayed as successful, good, and competent.*
- *White characters, by comparison, were more likely than non-white characters to be unsuccessful, bad, or incompetent.*
- *Prime time television programs featured many African American characters that could be positive role models for viewers.*

Qualitative exploration of diversity in prime time television looks beyond the numbers to the stories, the roles, the archetypes, and the character development. While these characteristics are more difficult to measure than numbers, they yield a deeper picture of how people of color are represented. To examine whether a character was presented as positive or successful, Children Now designed six measurements:[9]

1. *Right and Wrong Sides of the Law*
2. *Competence at Work*
3. *Competence at Home*
4. *Good or Bad Impressions*
5. *Success at Problem-Solving*
6. *Role Models*

While such measurements are not an exact science, these observations do reveal some patterns in television's portrayal of people of color, especially on the shows that have diversity in their casting.

Right and Wrong Sides of the Law

Previous analyses of prime time TV entertainment have discovered an overrepresentation of nonwhites as criminals,[10] a consistency that has been shown to impact the attitudes of viewers towards members of nonwhite racial groups.[11] To see if programs with a commitment to diversity in their primary recurring casts include such overrepresentation, we looked at the sub-sample of programs that fall in the genre of "crime" or "law."

Six of the programs in the sample were crime and/or law oriented (*Ally McBeal,* Fox; *Judging Amy,* CBS; *Law and Order,* NBC; *Martial Law,* CBS; *The Practice,* ABC; *Walker, Texas*

[9] See, e.g., George Gerbner, Casting the American Scene: Fairness and Diversity in Television Update and Trends Since the 1993 Screen Actors Guild Report (1998) (discussion of qualitative measurements for "heroes" and "zeroes").
[10] Gerbner, 1998.
[11] Huston et al., 1992.

Ranger, CBS). In those programs, 25 nonwhite characters appeared in either primary or secondary roles. Seven of those (28%) characters were law breakers or criminal defendants, and all appeared on just two programs (*Martial Law* and *Walker, Texas Ranger*).

African Americans appeared in the widest range of law-supporting roles in these programs. Not only did African American actors appear as police officers and detectives (*Law and Order, Martial Law, Walker*), but other African American characters included lawyers (*Ally McBeal, The Practice*), a court services officer (*Judging Amy*), judges (*Walker Texas Ranger, Ally McBeal*), trial witnesses (*Judging Amy*), and court appointed social workers (*Judging Amy*). In several of the episodes as well, nonwhite background characters appeared as witnesses, police informants, jurors, bailiffs, court reporters, and bystanders in the courtroom.

The balance for other minorities was less homogenous. While Latino characters were shown as involved with drug trafficking on these programs, other Latino characters were shown as a criminal defense lawyer (*Law and Order*), and a Texas Ranger (*Walker Texas Ranger*). Two Asian Pacific American actors played central roles as assassins on *Martial Law*, but two other Asian Pacific American actors appeared weekly as detectives. Asian Pacific Americans actors also appeared as a lawyer on *Ally McBeal* and a court-appointed guardian on *Judging Amy*.

Competence at Work

Characters also were evaluated for their competency at work. If a character was shown actually working—i.e., performing surgery, typing, conducting an interview—then that character was further assessed for his or her capabilities. For example, a typist who was shown as incapable of finding the correct keys on his keypad would be considered "incompetent," while a surgeon who successfully completed a procedure would be judged as "competent." Characters were sometimes considered as having "mixed" competency if they were shown with inconsistent capabilities—e.g., a doctor who can and cannot diagnose her patients' illnesses correctly; a writer whose articles are alternately celebrated and panned. There are a number of instances in which characters are shown in their places of work, but are never actually shown working. In these cases, the characters were not rated for their competence.

While more than three fourths of characters of all races are shown as competent in the workplace, characters of color were slightly more likely to be competent than their white counterparts.

TABLE 3: Competency at Work by Race

	White	African American	Asian Pacific American	Latino
Competency at Work	79%	91%	83%	91%

The disparity between whites and other races is even more pronounced when broken down

by genre and gender. For example, consider the difference between whites and African Americans in this analysis:

TABLE 4: Competency at Work by Gender for Whites & African Americans

	Sitcoms % Competent	Dramas % Competent
African American Males	88%	92%
White Males	67%	79%
African American Females	86%	94%
White Females	54%	89%

While all characters are shown as more competent in the workplace in dramas, African American characters are more likely to be competent across genres in each gender.

The Practice
Rebecca Washington, the African American female lawyer at the firm is assigned a difficult case, a client who is not guilty of the crime for which he is charged and is lying under oath to protect his boss and make a pile of money. Rebecca handles the case with intelligence and moral clarity. She tells the judge she cannot agree to a plea bargain based on her client's confession when she knows he is innocent. In the end, she and the judge devise a plan by which her client does not serve time.

Walker, Texas Ranger
Jimmy Trevet, Walker's African American sidekick, is very competent at his job. In one episode, Walker is missing (criminals have tried to kill him and he is stranded on an island), and Trevet both finds Walker and bring the criminal to justice. In this one episode, he conducts research on the computer, gives advice to an air traffic controller, scuba dives for evidence, and arrests a large number of criminals involved in the scheme.

City of Angels
In one episode, Ed O'Malley, a white city supervisor, decides to have surgery performed at Angels of Mercy Hospital. However, he brings in his white doctor, Dr. Solomon, from Cedars Sinai to perform the surgery and be assisted by Ben Turner, an African American surgeon at Angels of Mercy Hospital. Dr. Solomon is condescending to Dr. Turner and the surgical residents, refusing to listen to their ideas for an alternative way to perform the surgery. During the operation, Dr. Solomon cuts a critical artery and Dr. Turner must step in to save Mr. O'Malley's life. During a press conference after the surgery, Dr. Turner does not mention Dr. Solomon's mistake and a relieved Dr. Solomon publicly praises Dr. Turner.

Becker
Linda, a white assistant in Dr. Becker's family practice, shows up late to work, misplaces patient records, and is generally regarded by Dr. Becker and Margaret, the office manager, as "clueless."

Spin City

James, a speech writer for Mayor Winston, becomes so intimidated by the talents of the new Campaign Manager that he becomes unable to write any longer.

Competence at Home

In the home arena, only those characters that were shown actually performing some sort of domestic activity were judged for their competence. For example, tasks such as cooking, cleaning, feeding or disciplining children, and doing laundry were used to evaluate whether the character was successful or not. People shown in the home environment who were on the telephone or getting dressed, for example, were not assessed for competency.

More than three quarters of the white (77%) and African American (81%) characters surveyed in all shows were competent in the home. Breaking the number down by genre, characters were more competent in dramas than in sitcoms, with over 80% of white and African American dramatic characters showing competency.

TABLE 5: Competency at Home by Gender for Whites & African Americans

	Sitcoms % Competent	Dramas % Competent
African American Males	67%	100%
White Males	80%	86%
African American Females	100%	80%
White Females	40%	82%

African Americans

Moesha

Both Frank and Dee (African American) are excellent examples of minority characters who portray competence in the home sphere. They act as a team in decision making regarding their children, never making rash decisions or doling out unfair punishments. Frank most often gives philosophical advice ("just be yourself," "college allows you to find out what you want to be,") while Dee provides day-to-day oversight of the family ("clean your room," "no, you won't eat upstairs"). In one episode, Dorian steals Frank's car and later parks it in a tow-away zone. Frank and Dee find the appropriate punishment for his crime and apply it fairly, but not harshly.

The Hughleys

Darryl and Vonnie Hughley (African American) are trying to figure out what to do with their son, Michael, who ignores them when they tell him he cannot go skateboarding in the neighbor's drained pool. The Hughleys decide to spank Michael as punishment. After Michael complains that none of his friends get spanked and tells his parents that the neighbors all think they are mean, the Hughleys reconsider their punishment. After a great deal of soul-searching and consulting friends and family, the Hughleys decide to stop spanking their children.

Whites

The most interesting figure in Table 5 concerns white females in sitcoms, where only 40% were judged to be competent in the home. Whereas past stereotypes of white may have included matriarchal homemakers such as June Cleaver *(Leave It To Beaver)* and Carol Brady *(The Brady Bunch)*, today's programming offers different representations.

Other Racial Minorities

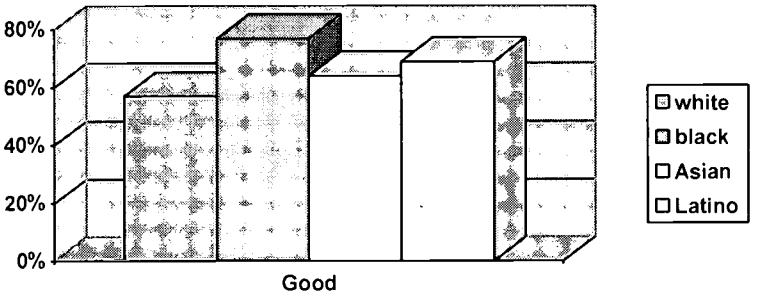
The small number of Asian Pacific American and Latino characters prevented any significant comparison of their competency at home. There was only one Asian Pacific American character and one Latino character shown at home. The Asian female was considered competent (100%) and the Latino character was considered inconsistently competent.

Good or Bad Impressions

Most characters leave viewers with an overall impression of "good" or "bad." Although this may appear a simplistic classification for many complex characters, it is still a plot device that drives the majority of programs during prime time. For the purposes of this study, Children Now defined "good" characters as the protagonists and "bad" characters as the antagonists on programs. Those characters that we know very little about and who did not factor greatly in the plot were judged to be "neutral." A character was judged to be "mixed" if s/he "converted" at some point during the sample. For example, a criminal who became a police informant on *Martial Law* was judged as "mixed" since he initially started out as a "bad guy" but became a "good guy."

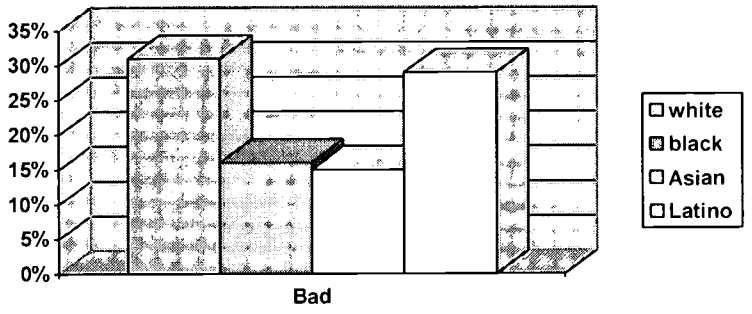
Overall, characters of color were more likely to be judged as "good' than white characters, with African American characters most likely (77%) and white characters least likely (57%).

TABLE 6: Characters Judged As "Good" By Race



Accordingly, white characters were also more likely to be considered "bad." For example, in sitcoms, whites were almost twice as likely to be "bad" as blacks (19% vs. 10%). This pattern held for dramas as well (whites at 31% and blacks at 16%), although Latinos were also likely to be judged as "bad" in dramatic series (29%).

TABLE 7: Dramatic Characters Judged As "Bad" By Race



This racial distribution of good and bad characters may be evidence of industry efforts to include more positive characters of color. Thus, we see on television portrayals of super competent non-whites, while most of the bad guys and buffoonish or "ditsy" characters are white. Some examples of these patterns include:

Walker, Texas Ranger
The good/bad dichotomy is played out on every episode of *Walker*. In all three episodes, minority characters (Trevet and Sydney of the Texas Rangers) apprehend white criminals. In one episode, for example, Sydney helps protect a mob accountant and his family who have decided to testify against the mob boss. The mob boss, who is later captured, is white.

For Your Love
Melina, the African American lead female in the show, is attending her high school reunion. At the reunion, she runs into her arch rival from high school, Fereba (white female). Fereba, much to everyone's surprise, is in a wheelchair. By the end of the evening, Melina, who is jealous of all the attention Fereba is getting, finds out that she is faking it—she has no disability.

ER
Jeannie Boulet, an African American physician's assistant is clearly a "good" or protagonist character. She is shown as caring and competent, although she bends the rules to protect the health of an infant with HIV. Luca Kovach is another protagonist character. He is a Croatian doctor who is also shown as caring, kind, and willing to bend the rules if he believes it benefits the patients. Dr. Robert Romano (white male) is a classic example of an antagonist, or "bad" character, whose presence in the storylines is usually disruptive to the protagonists. He is insulting, bullying, and condescending to his colleagues in the E.R.

Sports Night
Sam Donovan (white male), a ratings expert hired by executive producer Isaac Jaffe to improve the ratings of the sports news program, initially is portrayed as a selfish antagonist, ignoring the wishes and ideas of the show's producers and talent. During the three episodes in the sample, however, Sam changes from being a "bad" guy to being a "good" guy as he shows support for the staff in front of network brass and begins to earn their respect.

Success at Problem-Solving

Television show plots are driven by the characters' conflicts and attempts to resolve them. Overall, 50% of characters in this sample solved their problems successfully within an individual episode. Whites had the fewest successful resolutions, but Latinos had the most frequent unsuccessful resolutions. The Latino lack of success is primarily due to their high frequency of representation as apprehended criminals on *Walker Texas Ranger*.

TABLE 8: Problem-Solving By Race

Solution Type	White	Black	Asian	Latino	Total Sample
Successful resolution	44%	62%	74%	61%	50%
Unsuccessful resolution	20%	15%	13%	28%	19%
Unresolved at end of episode	20%	15%	13%	11%	32%

The sample covered a broad range of problems, attempted solutions, and results. The table below presents some examples:

TABLE 9: Examples of Problem-Solving

FAMILY PROBLEMS			
Character & Show	**Problem**	**Proposed Solution**	**Measure of Success**
Darryl Hughley (African American), *The Hughleys*	Son Michael and neighbors think his approach to discipline (spanking) is wrong.	Darryl decides that spanking may not be the best solution and tells Michael they will try to talk out their problems from now on.	Resolved to character's satisfaction
Frank (African American), *Moesha*	Dorian, Frank's sister's son (who is later revealed to be his son) moves in with the family. Dorian runs away from home regularly and is, in general, uncontrollable.	Not clear whether Dorian's immersion into Frank's family will help Dorian or destroy the closeness of Frank's family.	Unresolved
PERSONAL PROBLEMS			
Character & Show	**Problem**	**Proposed Solution**	**Measure of**

			Success
Ling (Asian Pacific American), *Ally McBeal*	Thinks that she may be gay because she wants to kiss Ally.	Kisses Ally and thoroughly enjoys it, but decides (as does Ally) that she needs to be with men.	Resolved to character's satisfaction
Fez (Latino), *That 70s Show*	Likes Kelso's girlfriend, Jackie and thinks that she likes him.	Kelso punches him in the face; Jackie doesn't leave Kelso.	Resolved, but not to character's satisfaction.

WORK PROBLEMS			
Character & Show	**Problem**	**Proposed Solution**	**Measure of Success**
Chakotay (Native American), *Star Trek: Voyager*	Disagrees with the Commander about how to deal with rival starship. Commander Janeway wants to destroy the rival starship, killing all on board.	He convinces her to let their opponents live, and they offer them asylum on their ship.	Resolved to character's satisfaction.
D.A. Jack McCoy and Assistant D.A. Abbie Carmichael (both white) *Law and Order*	Attempting to secure a life imprisonment sentence for a 10-year old confessed murderer.	Judge rules that the girl is too young to be considered responsible or incapable of rehabilitation and orders her sent home to her mother and to undergo psychiatric treatment.	Resolved, but not to character's satisfaction.
Wayne Vincent (African American), *Popular*	Vincent, a drama teacher, wants to get the popular quarterback to star in his musical, but the football coach wants him for the school team.	At the end of the sample episodes, it was still unclear if the student was going to manage to both play quarterback on the football team and star in the musical.	Unresolved.

Role Models

While prime time entertainment programming contains examples of racial stereotyping and racist humor, it also features nonwhite characters who embody positive traits and can serve as role models to viewers. Numerous research studies have shown that TV viewers often take characters—and the actors who play them—as role models (Johnston and Ettema, 1986; Bandura, 1994). Characters who are successful, powerful, and respected are most often chosen as role models. Characters whose experiences are similar to viewers are also likely to be chosen as role models.

In this sample of programs, we discovered a number of nonwhite characters who are successful, competent, and respected, and who operate in a world that is similar to the one many viewers inhabit—one that includes both personal and professional concerns. These characters are most often found on dramas, but some can be found on situation comedies.

African American TV Role Models

Dr. Peter Benton on NBC's *ER* (played by Eriq La Salle) is a fine example of a well-developed character who is successful both in his professional life as a surgeon and in his role as a father. Dr. Benton's character is shown as a caring, competent, and hard working doctor, father, and friend.

Lt. Anita Van Buren on NBC's *Law and Order* (played by S. Epatha Merkerson) leads a team of male detectives in solving crime in New York City. She is competent and tough, but compassionate. She was shown on two occasions defending her detectives to the district attorney.

Isaac Jaffe, fictional executive producer of *Sports Night* (ABC) (played by Robert Guillaume). There is clear mutual admiration and respect between Isaac and his crew, as they come to him for help, but also show concern about his fragile health. Isaac commands a mostly white production crew with humor and respect.

Dee Mitchell, Moesha's stepmother on *Moesha* (UPN) (played by Sheryl Lee Ralph), is a high school principal, wife, and mother. She has a good relationship with her husband and her children, and is successful at work. She is shown as competent and caring.

Dr. Ben Turner, a surgeon on *City of Angels* (CBS) (played by Blair Underwood), is compassionate and caring. He is devoted to working in an inner-city hospital where he can make a difference for people who need it most.

Dr. Vivian Price, Medical Director at Angels of Mercy Hospital (*City of Angels,* CBS) (played by Vivica A. Fox) is smart, savvy, and passionate about her job. She shows compassion for patients but does not tolerate bad business practices. She is committed to improving the care of patients in the hospital.

Non-Black Minority TV Role Models:

Chakotay, a Native American First Officer on *Star Trek: Voyager* (UPN) (played by Robert Beltran), is shown as competent and caring, knowing when to question the orders of his commanding officer. He supports his fellow crew members in times of trouble, and is respected by them.

Lilly, a Latina high school sophomore on *Popular* (WB) (played by Tamara Mello), stands up for her beliefs and refuses to bow to peer pressure. She supports her friends in their pursuits and willingly endures embarrassing hardships to promote a cause.

CONCLUSION

Prime time entertainment programming presents a world that both reflects and affects the cultural attitudes and beliefs of viewers. Children recognize that media grants legitimacy to racial groups through recognition and respect. In *Fall Colors*, Children Now found that people of color are not fully recognized, as they are under-represented in prime time programming. *Fall Colors II* found that even in programs with some level of diversity, characters of color are portrayed in limited ways and with secondary plot relevance.

There is much room for improvement in diverse prime time portrayals, with each racial group facing specific challenges. The frequency with which characters of color appear and the types of programs in which they are found is largely dependent on their race. African American characters tend to be compartmentalized to sitcoms and generally are only shown in one arena—work. Asian Pacific Americans are rarely shown and their few representations lack depth and development. The few Latinos characters on prime time are relegated to secondary dramatic story lines. Finally, both Asian Pacific American and Latino characters are often the victims of racial humor and stereotypes.

While white and nonwhite characters had few romantic relationships, they regularly interacted professionally and socially on prime time television. Yet while they talked, worked, and played, they rarely acknowledged racial difference. Interestingly, across the 22 programs studied, only three programs (*ER*, *City of Angels*, and *Star Trek Voyager*) addressed issues of race explicitly. And when the remaining shows did address race, it was often in a humorous context, in which characters evoked stereotypes or poked fun at characters of other races.

However, *Fall Colors II* also revealed evidence of progress in the ways that characters of color are portrayed. Characters of color are more likely than white characters to be shown as "good," competent at work, successful at problem-solving, and upholders of the law. Finally, several nonwhite characters, particularly African Americans, are well developed, positive role models for viewers, particularly children.

Children deserve to see a prime time picture that reflects the increasingly diverse world in which they live, and presents a full range of portrayals of characters of different races. Today's children will be the first generation to come of age in an America where racial minorities are the numeric majority. Our future will depend upon their ability to develop positive racial identities and an appreciation of diversity, and in this respect, prime time television can play a significant role.

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Children Now is a non-partisan, independent voice for America's children, working to translate the nation's commitment to children and families into action. Children Now's mission is to improve conditions for all children, with particular attention to the needs of those who are poor or at risk.

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