Tyler Perry’s Madea Goes to Jail: Normalizing Hegemony and Stereotypes of “Black Crime”

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Abstract

This paper expands communication studies by analyzing Tyler Perry’s (2009) film Madea Goes to Jail. The study looked for theoretical themes and patterns that might suggest a compelling social framework for the film’s acceptance and commercial success. It was hypothesized that the film used counter-hegemonic themes to disrupt traditional American cultural hegemony. The author used qualitative ethnographic content analysis to examine the film using Cedric C. Clarke’s (1969) Stages of Minority Representation. Upon analysis, the film lacked any significant counter-hegemony, thus it is argued that the lack of counter-hegemony contributes to the normalizing of mass incarceration and stereotypes of “Black Crime.”

By the release of his first movie Dairy of a Mad Black Woman in 2005, Tyler Perry had already been successfully producing stage plays and touring the country for seven years (Tyler Perry Studios 2012). This was far removed from his early years, where he struggled to overcome childhood domestic violence, sexual abuse and subsequent homelessness (Bowles 2008). Perry used his first stage play entitled I Know I’ve Been Changed, as a therapeutic self-healing proclamation of forgiveness to his childhood abuser. The title, I Know I’ve Been Changed would also serve as metaphoric notice to the entertainment industry and academic scholars alike that Tyler Perry had arrived. Named the Highest Paid Man in Entertainment, Forbes magazine estimated Tyler Perry earned $135 million for the period May 2010 to May 2011 (Pomerantz 2011). As a point of reference, it took Spike Lee, another popular African American film maker, 25 years to amass $375 million in box office receipts, Perry has grossed in excess of $600 million in just over 5 years (IMDb.com, Inc. 2012). Perry’s title as the Highest Paid Man in Entertainment is consistent with previous scholarly research that found Perry has a near monopoly on the representation of middle class African Americans in scripted media (Harris and Tassie 2011). How Perry’s monopoly functions within the social framework and context of American mass media is worthy of scholarly inquiry and research.

By far Perry’s most successful movie was Madea Goes to Jail (MGJ) (Perry 2009) which grossed in excess of $90 million and was nominated for a 2010...
Nickolodian Kids Choice Award (IMDb.com, Inc. 2012; Tyler Perry Studios 2012). *Madea Goes to Jail* stars Perry’s most popular character Madea (aka Mabel Simmons); the plot centers around Madea and her experience with the criminal justice system. The supporting actors include notable and somewhat controversial archetypes created by Perry including Mr. Brown, Uncle Joe, and Cora. As such it is here argued for the purpose of this study, that *Madea Goes to Jail* is a critical case sample of Perry’s body of film work. Given Perry’s position of prominence in the entertainment industry and his production control, how he frames issues of race and criminal justice in the movie *Madea Goes to Jail* (MGJ) is of social significance and worthy of scholarly inquiry. In a promotional public interview with Gayle King, Perry stated he is very specific in his story telling and crafts his stories to appeal to a broad range of audience members both in age and race (King 2009). The statement “I am very specific” implies a thought-out scripting process in which his story lines and archetypes are crafted. In a 2009 public interview, he stated he is well aware of past media stereotypes of African Americans, including the black face minstrel shows of the 1930s and 1940s (Perry 2009). Despite his public assertions, critical scholars have questioned whether Perry is capable or even willing to disrupt negative media stereotypes of African Americans and challenge this system of American cultural hegemony (Harris and Tassie 2011; Heartley 2011; Lyle 2011; Patterson 2011).

This criticism comes despite Perry’s assertion that he portrays African Americans as they are in real life, counter to typical Hollywood fashion. Perry’s position would then suggest that his portrayals of African Americans are counter-hegemonic in relation to that of Anglo American hegemony. The use of 1960’s Civil Rights imagery in *MGJ*s marketing material would also suggest counter-hegemony. Thus it is predicted by the author that portrayals of African Americans in Perry’s *MGJ* will contain images and discourse presented in a way that will disrupt historical representations of African Americans, including both the black face minstrel shows of the early 20th century and the myths of black crime.

**Literature Review**

Negative media images and stereotypes of African Americans have been a consistent theme historically in American mass media (Mastro and Tropp 2004). The media framing of race and class are dominant themes in American mass media, used to maintain the status quo of Anglo American hegemony and its economic and social hierarchy (Clark 1969; Shohat and Stam 1994). The concept of hegemony was developed by Antonio Gramsci. In broad terms it describes a system of suppression and domination through which both implicit and implied forces are used to manipulate the oppressed into accepting a subjugated status (Chaudhuri 1988; Lears 1985). In the American system of hegemony, mass media became an explicit tool from the movie *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith 1915). The movie depicted the majority if not all African Americans as dumb, lazy, dishonest, and hyper sexual. These types of media depictions represent American cultural hegemony, as well as illustrate the psychological force of negative media stereotypes needed to construct the same American cultural hegemony (Pierre 1999). American cultural hegemony’s resulting mass media artifacts of the 20th century reflect a systematic creation and distribution of negative images and stereotypes of African Americans (Clark 1969; Jhally and Lewis 1992; Pierre 1999; Shohat and Stam 1994).

Once fully constructed, the system of cultural hegemony no longer requires the presence of the dominant group and its implied force to function. The subjugated status of the oppressed minorities is internalized, accepted and embraced. The superior status of the dominant group is no longer questioned, it is deemed just and fair (Fitzgerald 2010). At full manifestation, members of the oppressed minority can be placed in positions of power within the hegemonic system and it will still function no differently. Critical scholars have begun to question whether Perry fits the profile of the oppressed minority in a position of power functioning as an agent of American cultural hegemony (Coleman 2006; Harris and Tassie 2011; Heartley 2011; Lyle 2011; Patterson 2011).

**The Black Crime Construct and Mass Incarceration**

Mass media and mass incarceration of African Americans are used to construct cultural hegemony (Alexander 2010; Dixon 2008). As noted by Alexander (2010) and Dixon (2008), black crime was a frequent theme in American nightly news media as it disproportionately portrayed African Americans engaged in criminal behavior contrary to the actual demographic. A review of American media and literature shows a pattern of specific cultural artifacts that normalize the mass incarceration of African Americans. The United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world, which includes per capita and total incarcerated (Alexander 2010; Clear 2008; Roberts 2004; Walmsley 2011) Michele Alexander’s study of primary and secondary data detailed the disproportional rate at which African Americans and minorities in general are being incarcerated. The underlying disparity in rates of incarceration is a function of economic disparity rather than of genetic social behavior patterns (Alexander 2010; Roberts 2004). Alexander’s book noted that if controlled for socio-economic status, rates of incarceration between whites and non-whites are nearly identical. While the phenomenon of mass incarceration began as an answer to the crack epidemic and resulting drug war of the 1980s, the public acceptance and justification was largely achieved through mediated messages of “black crime” associated with 1980’s crack cocaine epidemic (Alexander 2010). Any discussion or depiction of incarceration of African Americans would certainly have to include reference to the drug war and their disproportional rates of incarceration.
Thus it is predicted that Perry’s 2009 film Madea Goes to Jail would contain dialogue or descriptions that detail the disproportional rates at which African Americans are being incarcerated. American political discourse and the resulting media framing of race and the criminal justice system are important tools used to construct the normalization of mass incarceration of African Americans.

Mass Media

How African Americans are portrayed in mass media affects how African Americans use mass media (Abrams 2008; Fujioka 2005). A 2008 survey found that African Americans primarily use television for entertainment based on the uses and gratification (U&G) perspective; this was in comparison to other potential uses such as information or learning (Abrams 2008). The same study also found that African Americans avoid television programming based on ethnic identity gratification or programming that lacks representation of in-group members. The repeated themes of black crime and negative stereotypes of African Americans in American mass media have played a major role in normalizing the mass incarceration of African Americans (Alexander 2010). Even so, as Fitzgerald (2010) pointed out, the communication scholarship of race and media hegemony is lacking: “Communications scholars for the most part have been far behind literary analysts and cultural scholars in articulating the connection between stereotypes and the processes of colonization” (Fitzgerald 2010, 369).

Tyler Perry

Much of the previous research, while acknowledging the success of Tyler Perry and his films, attributes Perry’s success to emotional themes. Harris and Tassie (2011) and Patterson (2011) have gone so far as to attribute his success to audience ignorance and willful acceptance of the negative stereotypes used in Perry’s films. Patterson (2011) put forward a possible explanation for the audience phenomenon: Jacqueline Bobo’s theory of negotiated reception where audience members identify with on-screen experiences that bring to mind their own personal experiences and reject on-screen experiences that do not (Patterson 2011). The qualitative criticism of African American audiences lacks qualitative audience analysis to support such generalized conclusions and contradicts previous research that suggests African Americans are a more critical audience when evaluating media portrayals of in-group members (Davis and Gandy 1999).

Given Perry’s public statements, MGJ’s symbolic civil rights imagery, and depictions of the criminal justice system; it is hypothesized by this author that the film will contain themes of counter-hegemony, which would provide a theoretical framework from which to suggest how the film achieved intercultural attraction and commercial success. This hypothesis served as the basis for the author’s research question: Are themes of counter-hegemony present and do they disrupt traditional stereotypes of African Americans and American criminal justice system presented in Tyler Perry’s Madea Goes to Jail (2009)? Using Cedric C. Clark’s (1969) Stages of Minority Representation, this study analyzes how Perry presents themes of American hegemony, race and the criminal justice system in his film Madea Goes to Jail (Perry 2009).

The author makes two assumptions based on previous scholarly research. First the study assumes the normalization and acceptance of mass incarceration by all social, ethnic and political classes has already occurred (Alexander 2010; Roberts 2004; Tassie 2011). This assumption is necessary to set the proper social context for the critical analysis of Madea Goes to Jail. As evidenced by the film’s title, and the ethnicity of the supporting characters in it, the film deals directly with themes of race and criminal justice. In place of this assumption, a lengthy discussion would be required to establish what other scholars have already researched and found to be true; African Americans are incarcerated at a disproportionately higher rate than all other American racial ethnicities (Alexander 2010; Roberts 2004; Tassie 2011). The second assumption this study makes is Anglo-American hegemony is dominant and pervasive in mass media (Pierre 1999; Shohat and Stam 1994; Shugart 2007). This assumption further develops the social context of this critical analysis by establishing that from its inception, American mass media has served as a master tool of American hegemony. The resulting hegemonic propaganda is used to socially condition all members of society of the superior nature of the dominant group and reinforce through negative stereotypes and ridicule the subjugated status of oppressed minorities. This includes the media depictions and representations that create the “black crime” stereotypes and directly contribute to the normalization and acceptance of mass incarceration in our first assumption (Alexander 2010).

Without this assumption a lengthy review would be required to establish both the role of American socio-politics and the depth of hegemonic media propaganda in the construction of “black crime” stereotypes and other negative and demeaning media images of African Americans. The purpose of this research is to examine how Tyler Perry frames these two assumptions along with race in the movie Madea Goes to Jail (Perry 2009).

Methodology

The study analyzes the film Madea Goes to Jail using qualitative methodology, specifically Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA). Given the two previous assumptions, Ethnographic Content Analysis is the most appropriate method of content analysis for identifying and analyzing the phenomena of interest within the scope of Madea Goes to Jail. This method’s unique characteristics make it well suited for identifying and verifying theoretical relationships in mass media artifacts. It is most notable for its instinctive nature with respect to the process of qualitative scientific inquiry (Altheide 1987). For the purpose of this research, the author viewed the film three times with the aid of video editing software. The first
viewing was used to identify cinematic points of transition between scenes, this was done to insure the context of each scene could be identified and preserved. The second viewing was used to divide the movie into 48 scenes and label the scenes based on the cinematic points of transition. In addition during the second viewing video still thumbnails were captured for each scene. During the third viewing ECA was used to code the scenes looking for the presence or absence of traditional hegemonic representation of African Americans. If a presence was found it was coded according to Cedric C. Clark’s four stages of minority representation:

1. **Non-recognition**: A given minority group is not acknowledged by the dominant media to even exist.

2. **Ridicule**: Certain minority characters are portrayed as stupid, silly, lazy, irrational, or simply laughable.

3. **Regulation**: Certain minority characters are presented as enforcers or administrators of the dominant group’s norms.

4. **Respect**: The minority group in question is portrayed no differently than any other group. Interracial relationships would also not appear extraordinary. (quoted in Fitzgerald 2010, 368)

During the third viewing an excel spread sheet was created for the purpose of coding each scene and noting dialogue and symbolic imagery present in each scene. The choice of Clark’s model was based on its historically detailed description of how African Americans and minorities in general were represented in American mass media. Although Clark’s model was written over 40 years ago and mainly discussed television it is timely and relevant, in that it correctly identifies the hegemonic structure of American mass media:

> Television reflects the social structure of society by selection and presentation of characters associated with its structural divisions. The commercial nature of the medium emphasizes advertising of products bought by those at the top of the social structure, and thus reinforces the status quo. There is no quick solution to the problem...for it must still operate under one severe restraint: He who pays the price calls the tune. If white Americans want continued regulation and control of certain groups, under current operating rules they will get it. (Clark 1969, 18).

While the medium may have changed, the fundamental cybernetic process of conflict, control and communication that Clark (1969) described still exists in American mass media today. However there are noted weaknesses in the four stages. Specifically it was based on casual observations and not on a scholarly study employing rigorous methodology (Fitzgerald 2010; Fuentez and White 1997). Additionally scholarly critiques found the descriptions of Clark’s stages were mostly accurate, but the assumption that minority representation progressed in a linear fashion through the stages was not always accurate (Fitzgerald 2010; Money 1997). For example American Indians backslide in the model continuously going back and forth from non-recognition to ridicule, occasionally rising to regulation then back to non-recognition (Money 1997). Conversely other scholars have found Clark’s four stages useful for empirical research including Mary Alice Money’s “Seven Stages of Images of Native Americans” and Alice A. Tait’s “Evolutionary Stages of Minorities in Mass Media” (Fitzgerald 2010). It was reasoned that Perry as an ethnic minority would portray African Americans in a way that would defy traditional hegemonic representations of African Americans described in Clark’s model, thus possibly explaining the film’s commercial success.

**Results**

The study found the presence of traditional hegemonic themes as consistent with Clark’s four stages of minority representation in television. Specifically, the author found several examples of ridicule and regulation in the film. Additionally the study found few (if any) positive examples of resistance or disruption of American cultural hegemony in the representation of African Americans and the American criminal justice system. This point is clearly illustrated in the film’s prison chapel scene where the film’s main character Madea suggests the American criminal justice system is by and large fair, and the minority or oppressed people under its control had no one to blame but themselves for their incarceration. The movie contains token representations of counter hegemony; for example in one scene Madea challenges a member of the dominant group who cut in front of her and took her parking space. This challenge is immediately followed by ridicule at the minority character’s expense, where Madea steals a front loader, and picks up the car of the dominant group member and smashes it to the ground. As one might expect by the title of the movie, Madea is then exposed to regulation and taken off to jail. Token challenges such as this are not considered counter hegemonic for the purpose of this study.

The researcher then sought to identify the themes as they are presented in relation to the criminal justice system by adapting Clark’s four stages. The adaptation of Clark’s model for further analysis was based on adaptations done by previous scholars Alice A. Tait and Mary Alice Money, as they sought to identify and verify theoretical relationships between minority representations and American mass media. The names for the stages in the author’s adapted model are similar to the original except for the fourth stage, which is changed to Normalization. In Clark’s (1969) model, if African Americans were being portrayed no differently than any other group in society represented, it signified respect. In the authors adapted model African Americans being represented no differently than any other group in relation to the criminal justice system represents normalization of the mass incarceration of African Americans. The title of the adapted model is:
Stages of Hegemonic Media Regulation and Control. It includes four stages used for coding and analysis:

1. Non-recognition: Minority criminal characters experience no lasting ill effect of incarceration (home ownership, voting, etc.). Thus the minority character’s criminal behavior is glorified.

2. Ridicule: Minority criminal characters are portrayed as stupid, silly, lazy, irrational, or simply laughable.

3. Regulation: The upper class minority characters are presented as celebrities, enforcers or administrators of the dominant group’s norms. Upper class minority characters display disdain for lower class minorities.

3a. Members of dominant group appear in regulation, but as helpers not enforcers.

4. Normalization. Minority criminal characters in question are portrayed no differently than any other racial group in the criminal justice system, true disparity not always readily apparent.

There were numerous examples of regulation, particularly minorities in the role of enforcers and administrators of the dominant group’s norms (i.e., prosecutor and/or celebrity judges such as Mablean Ephriam and Greg Mathis, both of whom are reality television personalities). Further analysis also identified a somewhat predictable pattern of representation and storytelling, where the criminal minority is portrayed in the stage of non-recognition and glorification of criminal behavior. This stage is then followed by ridicule where the minority character is portrayed as silly or laughable, regulation then follows to bring the criminal minority in line with the dominant group’s norms. This suggests a pattern as to how Perry constructs his story lines using non-recognition, ridicule, and regulation as repetitive themes, thus reinforcing the negative stereotype of black crime about African Americans.

Conclusion & Discussion

Putting African Americans both in front of, and behind, the camera is instrumental in the fight to overcome and change hegemonic images of African Americans (Mcgilligan 2004; Williams 1995). Cornel West states that postmodern producers of culture have no responsibility greater than to challenge cultural hegemony and create alternative perceptions of African Americans (West 1985). Scholar bell hooks’ critique of media suggests that individuals who exist on the margin between the oppressed and oppressor have a special responsibility to disrupt hegemonic discourse (Littlejohn and Foss 2011; hooks 1989). Perry is one of those people: a postmodern producer of culture on the margin between the oppressed and oppressor. Perry is clearly someone behind the camera and capable of creating alternate perceptions of African Americans in media and disrupting hegemonic discourse.

It is argued by the author that Perry’s unwillingness to disrupt hegemony and create alternative perceptions of African Americans, stems from the troubling perspective that one must sacrifice commercial success to create counter-hegemony. This mindset is evident from his 2009 interview with Gayle King, where Perry stated that he believed making good movies AND being successful are polar opposites (King 2009). This leaves those of a critical audience and scholars to reason that he is fully aware of the negative stereotypes and images that his movies portray. Perhaps Perry believes his only method of success is to purposely develop films that appeal to uncritical audiences even if it is to their own detriment. To counter Perry’s statement, commercially successful entertainment and counter hegemony need not be mutually exclusive. They can and should co-exist, no differently than hegemony and entertainment co-exists today. One should not give in to the commercial advertisement argument as Clark stated in 1969, mass media’s dependency on commercial advertising is in and of itself an organ of hegemony, there to reinforce the status quo by suggesting commercial success is entirely dependent on appealing to the dominant group’s norms and regulations (Clark 1969). The numerous examples of ridicule in the movie are more troubling in that ridicules serve two purposes in the Anglo American system of hegemony as scholar M. R. Fitzgerald (2010) noted:

Ridicule serves to dehumanize or infantilize subjugated peoples—not so much as a psychological weapon to demoralize them or as a way of controlling them—although this too might be considered an “advantage”—but to convince skeptical or guilt-ridden members of the dominant group that their supremacy is “natural,” fair, and inevitable. (370)

In Perry’s interview with Gayle King, Perry stated the film’s purpose was to make people laugh and provide entertainment to the masses in hard economic times. The use of “black crime” and themes of incarceration as entertainment potentially have far reaching consequences for the perpetual re-cycling of negative stereotypes of African Americans. Upon analysis, the film lacked any significant counter-hegemonic discourse, or disruption of hegemonic stereotype of minorities in media; in their absence, the stereotypes portrayed in the film are consistent with media normalization of mass incarceration and new Jim Crow stereotypes (Alexander 2010). Thus the research hypothesis was rejected; this normalization process is strongly suggested by the film’s nomination for a Nickelodeon 2010 Kids Choice Award. Nickelodeon’s target audience is 6-11 years old children, an audience still in the early stages of forming racial identity and stereotypes. By offering “black crime” as entertainment to such a young audience, Perry is suggesting that the issue of mass incarceration of African Americans is of no significant consequence. The film would suggest to that same 6-11 year
old audience, that by and large the criminal justice system is fair and just, thus implying disproportional incarceration rates of African Americans is purely of their own doing. It certainly could be argued with good reason that Perry’s film *MGJ* creates a false illusion at the expense of an already disadvantaged group, thus ultimately serving as a form of system justification and false consciousness (Jost and Banaji 1994).

**Future Research**

Previous scholarly research on Tyler Perry and his films have primarily focused on qualitative content analysis. There is very little, if any, empirical quantitative research on audience reaction to Perry’s movies. Additional quantitative survey research needs to be done to understand how both African Americans and non-African Americans perceive the images and stereotypes in Perry’s films. This would help to understand how Perry’s movie affects intercultural relationships, attitudes and perceptions of African Americans. Additional research may also discover if the knowledge of past stereotypes are passed on from one generation to the next, as described by Annette Henry (1990). This is important in the context of understanding how the exploitation of uncritical audiences occurs. Particularly in situations where their parents or grandparents may have lived through the Amos and Andy, black face and minstrel shows of early 20th century, yet for all the pain and ridicule their parents or grandparents may have suffered, the current generation of African American movie goers seems un-offended by the re-incarnation of these past stereotypes. It’s important to understand whether African American audiences are consciously aware, or to what significance they give these past stereotypes. These historical stereotypes and criticism may not explain how African American audiences perceive and judge Tyler Perry films for their entertainment value under the uses and gratification (U&G) perspective and out-group vitality (Abrams 2008). Moreover, additional research may reveal how uncritical audience behavior is constructed or created in the broader context of cultural hegemony.

**References**


Although college enrollment is at an all-time high, most universities are graduating only about half of their students within four years (USDE-NCES 2011); this is a problem that is more likely to impact students from low socioeconomic areas (Perkins-Gough 2008). College students that attended high school in low or high SES areas received an online survey about perceived differences in educational preparedness. The findings show that students from both SES area high schools perceived that they were prepared for college, and that teachers had high expectations for them throughout high school. Results also indicate that fewer students from the low SES area perceived that they had enrollment opportunities. These opportunities may enhance preparation and hence, an examination of equitable funding for schools is warranted.

College enrollment has increased drastically over the past 20 years, with a 45% increase in full time students from 1999 to 2009 (USDE-NCES 2011). However, statistics show that only 50% of students that enroll in four-year colleges obtain their degree within the expected time (Perkins-Gough 2008). This is a problem; higher education for students and their families is the American dream for countless students, including minority and underrepresented students. Many students have been told that college is their key to financial freedom and that it will allow them to break the glass ceiling present in many industries and institutions (Perkins-Gough 2008).

Some of the causes of such high student dropout rates can be attributed to the lack of family involvement, poor schooling, peers, and a variety of other factors (Balduf 2009). Research indicates almost 50% of college students are unprepared for college level work (Long, Iatarola, and Conger 2009). Many schools across the country are raising their entrance requirements. Also, one-third of college freshmen find themselves unprepared in Mathematics and English, along with many other core academic disciplines (Long, Iatarola, and Conger 2009). In many low performing schools across the country, up to 80% of students are considered behind in basic academic skills (Steinberg and Almeida 2010); these students are not being challenged and are being held to a