The Inclusive Office: Representations of diversity in media are problematic, and that causes real problems

By: Special to The Daily Record Heather Neu March 4, 2020

In the limited run of "The Inclusive Office," I've already twice encouraged consuming diverse media — watching TV and movies made by and starring people different from you, listening to podcasts hosted by people different from you, reading fiction made by and focusing on people different from you, reading non-fiction about events you weren't taught in school, generally doing anything to get outside of our own bubbles (intentionally or incidentally created).

I give this such great emphasis because the media we consume is conclusively linked to our perceptions of the people and groups depicted therein. As far back as 1987, historian Carlos Cortes forewarned that mass media and our consumption of the same has "ominous implications for minority and other ethnic groups. … [W]hether intentionally or unintentionally, both the news and the entertainment media 'teach' the public about minorities, other ethnic groups and societal groups, such as women, [LGBTQIA+], and the elderly." He found that this impact was particularly powerful "on people who have little or no direct contact with members of the groups being treated."

Indeed, *Scientific American* did a review of relevant studies and concluded that the empirical evidence shows "[a]lthough psychologists have known for a long time that people associate dark skin with negative personality traits, this research shows that the reverse is also true: when we hear about an evil act, we are more likely to believe it was done by someone with darker skin." A 2011 study conducted by The Opportunity Agenda concluded that this effect can lead to "less attention from doctors to harsher sentencing by judges, lower likelihood of being hired for a job or admitted to school, lower odds of getting loans, and a higher likelihood of being shot by police."

While there is less empirical evidence, the anecdata surrounding queer-coding demonstrates similar effects on the perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ community. Queer coding, much as the name suggests, refers to a process by which characters in a piece of fictional media, particularly villains, seem (that is, code) queer. As Ren Martinez describes, "[t]he use of verbal and visual markers creates connotations of queerness

without explicitly stating such, using elements such as body language, dress, vocal inflection, and other stereotypical aspects associated with sexual orientation." This is harmful when "[t]his 'otherness' becomes conflated with villainy. … These cues associated with queerness are now lessons in how not to be."

These problematic representations are ubiquitous. Indeed, they were my impetus for this very article. On Sunday, I attended *Jesus Christ Superstar* and left incensed — I mean bone deep, could barely speak to articulate it, angry. There was not a single performer in a "villainous" role who did not appear gay in some way. Not one. After Judas questioned Jesus' relationship with Mary Magdalene, he feinted in such a way that forces the audience to question whether he has non-platonic feelings for Jesus himself. The costuming and choreography of Caiaphas and the priests were textbooks examples of homoerotic. Finally, King Herod appeared in an over-the-top gold lame costume with drag-style makeup, before he lost his coat to reveal a lingerie-inspired bodysuit and thigh-high, high-heeled boots. On top of the queer-coding, casting was similarly problematic. As I reviewed the cast headshots, I noted "oh, Jesus is white and Judas is black. And Pilate is black. Don't love that."

On the other end of the target demographic spectrum, Disney is notorious for othering villains. Villains are queer-coded and racialized. As *Sociology Lens* identifies, *The Lion King*'s Scar's "most obvious racial marker is his darkened mane which stands in stark contrast to the lighter locks of Mustafa and adult Simba." *Aladdin's* Jafar conforms to Arab and Muslim ethnic stereotypes "much more than Aladdin or Jasmine, both of whom could easily pass (in white westerners' imaginations) as well-tanned Americans if not for their desert setting." They're also queer-coded — Jafar and Scar are impeccably groomed, averse to physical labor, and possess mannerisms and speech patterns deemed effeminate, especially when held in stark contrast to the stereotypical hyper-masculine heroes.

You can fight against this onslaught though, so don't close the "Disney vault" forever! Remain vigilant in checking yourself regarding the content of the media you consume (I promise it's not that hard and like everything else, it gets easier with practice). When you get that sense that something about what you're watching or listening to or reading is off, don't dismiss it out of hand; ask the next question — Why? What seems off? If it's a problematic representation, label it as such and internalize it as such. We don't have to accept what's presented to us as fact (arguably, that's one pillar upon which our profession rests). Next step? Change your media diet — burst your bubble and add diverse content made by creators and starring people different from you.

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