Perspectives 1

The Symbolic Annihilation of Race: A Review of the "Blackness" Literature

Robin R. Means Coleman, Ph.D., Department of Communication Studies, University of Michigan

Emily Chivers Yochim, Ph.D., Department of Communication Studies, University of Michigan

Abstract

In this review essay, we define the concept "symbolic annihilation of race" and present the scholarly research uses most often the "blackness" literature. We introduce the problem of race and discuss the need to define the concept "symbolic annihilation of race." We then review and summarize the findings of this concept in media and provide an overview of the research and theoretical analysis of this concept in media. We also discuss the need to define the concept "symbolic annihilation of race." In this review essay, we define the concept "symbolic annihilation of race." We then review and summarize the findings of this concept in media. We also discuss the need to define the concept "symbolic annihilation of race."
Stereotype versus Symbolic Annihilation of Race

A stereotype is defined as a conventional, formulized oversimplified concept of a group. It describes the promotion of an unvarying depiction of a group that, in a media context, has come to be associated with negative portrayals (Means Coleman, 2000). However, as a concept, 'stereotype' is particularly reliant on discourses that actively signify that which is a present and identifiable constructed image. A stereotype, then, is quite adept at drawing our attention to how individuals and groups are presented, but the concept may not function as well in capturing the meanings associated with absence, omission, or even an inclusion that is not so obviously problematic (negative). As such, in this review of the literature we detail the relevancy of a related, yet distinct concept, 'symbolic annihilation of race,' which, we argue, facilitates a deeper look at media as a site of American cultural politics in which imagery is not seen as simply positive or negative, but where ‘what things mean and how they register’ (Gray, 1995, p. 7) focus our attention upon the more complex hegemonic potentialities of media.

Origins of the Concept

The concept ‘symbolic annihilation’ was introduced by George Gerbner (1972). He first briefly referenced the concept without elaboration: ‘representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation’ (p. 44). Gerbner used the concept of symbolic annihilation to reveal how representations, including omissions, cultivate dominant assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality (p. 69). Likewise, Entman (1990, 1992) argues that American news media perpetuates a ‘modern racism’ in which rejection of systemic discriminations that plague African Americans is exhibited. Even actress Marla Gibbs, testifying in the 1990s before the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights, concluded ‘African Americans are more or less told who we are, rather than asked…We sing, we dance, we tell jokes – that’s all we are allowed to do.’ (Monroe, 1994, p. 84).

‘Stereotype’ versus ‘Symbolic Annihilation of Race’

Stereotype has been further extended to describe representations of racial and ethnic groups. For example, one notable elaboration of symbolic annihilation into the arena of race comes from Mazur (1984). Though he fails to cite either Gerber or Tuchman, Mazur explores how Mexican-American, zoot-suited youth were symbolically annihilated by Anglo sailors during World War II. The zoot suit riots of 1942 induced an emotional state that prompted soldiers to tell tall tales about their aggression against ‘enemy’ zoot-suiteds. The War II riots are a confirmation of Gerber’s simple definition of ‘absence’, to include imagistic ‘condemnation’ and ‘trivialization’ (p. 17). In Tuchman’s analysis, women may be represented as loving and good, and still be ‘trivialized’ when juxtaposed against a depiction of men, who are shown as wise and powerful. Because Gerber did not confine symbolic annihilation to any particular group, the concept is now deployed widely. Gaye Tuchman (1978) interrelational ‘Introduction: The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media’, applied the term to the treatment of women in a range of media and expanded the concept from Gerber’s simple definition of ‘absence’. Tuchman observed, ‘women are not important in American society, entertainment programming is fiction; viewers adopt a “TV answer”, in which content becomes the social reality. For example, if women are represented as nurses on television, then it is women, as nursing people, who are shown as wise and powerful. The concept even as they continued to extend its application. This adaptation marks a subtle shift as the authors argue that though the advent of mass media marks a shift away from Gerber’s original concept, the concept itself remains intact. As they continued to extend its application, the concept even as they continued to extend its application. This adaptation marks a subtle shift as the authors argue that though the advent of mass media marks a shift away from Gerber’s original concept, the concept itself remains intact. As they continued to extend its application, the concept even as they continued to extend its application. This adaptation marks a subtle shift as the authors argue that though the advent of mass media marks a shift away from Gerber’s original concept, the concept itself remains intact. As they continued to extend its application, the concept even as they continued to extend its application. This adaptation marks a subtle shift as the authors argue that though the advent of mass media marks a shift away from Gerber’s original concept, the concept itself remains intact. As they continued to extend its application, the concept even as they continued to extend its application. This adaptation marks a subtle shift as the authors argue that though the advent of mass media marks a shift away from Gerber’s original concept, the concept itself remains intact. As they continued to extend its application, the concept even as they continued to extend its application. This adaptation marks a subtle shift as the authors argue that though the advent of mass media marks a shift away from Gerber’s original concept, the concept itself remains intact. As they continued to extend its application, the concept even as they continued to extend its application. This adaptation marks a subtle shift as the authors argue that though the advent of mass media marks a shift away from Gerber’s original concept, the concept itself remains intact. As they continued to extend its application, the concept even as they continued to extend its application. This adaptation marks a subtle shift as the authors argue that though the advent of mass media marks a shift away from Gerber’s original concept, the concept itself remains intact.
news media went a step further, condemning the zoot-suiters by reporting "these are the type of exuberant youth that Hitler found useful" (p. 79). Therefore, both the soldiers and the media added a rhetorical dimension to the expanding imagistic-centered definition of symbolic annihilation. In reality, Mazon reveals, a relatively bloodless "riot" occurred, which was purposefully ignored by media (i.e., an "absence").

Others have found the application of symbolic annihilation necessary in deepening our understanding of the treatment of various racial and ethnic groups in media while speculating about its impact. For instance, in 1979, Tuchman cautioned that the term should be employed carefully as, "it too has been used to advocate a naively literal notion of mimesis" (p. 533). However, the concept has become more of an existential observation (e.g., the Chinese are symbolically annihilated through frequent representations as "triad" gang members) or a generic idiom for "stereotyped." As it pertains specifically to race, symbolic annihilation means that those racial groups who are not presented as fully developed in media, be it through absence, trivialization, and condemnation, may see their social status diminished.

Scholarship focusing on the treatment of blacks in media has relied quite heavily on this definition of racial symbolic annihilation, although the concept is not always explicitly referenced. To illustrate, Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie (1997) describe blacks as being ignored, stereotyped, or demeaned by media; their criticism echoes Gerbner's and Tuchman's original definitions which include "absence" as well as "condemnation" and "trivialization." Hooks argues that African American women have experienced condemnation as they are often relegated to controlling, sexually wanton representations (see also Hill Collins, 2000). Brown (2000) suggests that African American women have experienced sexualized condemnation as they are often regarded to control media's exploitations of blacks.

Columbia and Chivers Yochim (in press) conclude that the concept is not without limitations. In their critique of the concept, Means and Coleman (2000) claim that their analysis of race is to face the study of the treatment of blacks in media, i.e., the concept of the symbolic annihilation is not viable. The authors argue that media has a step further, condemning the zoot-suiters by reporting "these are the type of exuberant youth that Hitler found useful" (p. 79). Therefore, both the soldiers and the media added a rhetorical dimension to the expanding imagistic-centered definition of symbolic annihilation. In reality, a relatively bloodless "riot" occurred, which was purposefully ignored by media (i.e., an "absence").

Others have found the application of symbolic annihilation necessary in deepening our understanding of the treatment of various racial and ethnic groups in media while speculating about its impact. For instance, in 1979, Tuchman cautioned that the term should be employed carefully as, "it too has been used to advocate a naively literal notion of mimesis" (p. 533). However, the concept has become more of an existential observation (e.g., the Chinese are symbolically annihilated through frequent representations as "triad" gang members) or a generic idiom for "stereotyped." As it pertains specifically to race, symbolic annihilation means that those racial groups who are not presented as fully developed in media, be it through absence, trivialization, and condemnation, may see their social status diminished.

Scholarship focusing on the treatment of blacks in media has relied quite heavily on this definition of racial symbolic annihilation, although the concept is not always explicitly referenced. To illustrate, Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie (1997) describe blacks as being ignored, stereotyped, or demeaned by media; their criticism echoes Gerbner's and Tuchman's original definitions which include "absence" as well as "condemnation" and "trivialization." Hooks argues that African American women have experienced condemnation as they are often relegated to controlling, sexually wanton representations (see also Hill Collins, 2000). Brown (2000) suggests that African American women have experienced sexualized condemnation as they are often regarded to control media's exploitations of blacks.

Columbia and Chivers Yochim (in press) conclude that the concept is not without limitations. In their critique of the concept, Means and Coleman (2000) claim that their analysis of race is to face the study of the treatment of blacks in media, i.e., the concept of the symbolic annihilation is not viable. The authors argue that media has a step further, condemning the zoot-suiters by reporting "these are the type of exuberant youth that Hitler found useful" (p. 79). Therefore, both the soldiers and the media added a rhetorical dimension to the expanding imagistic-centered definition of symbolic annihilation. In reality, a relatively bloodless "riot" occurred, which was purposefully ignored by media (i.e., an "absence").

Others have found the application of symbolic annihilation necessary in deepening our understanding of the treatment of various racial and ethnic groups in media while speculating about its impact. For instance, in 1979, Tuchman cautioned that the term should be employed carefully as, "it too has been used to advocate a naively literal notion of mimesis" (p. 533). However, the concept has become more of an existential observation (e.g., the Chinese are symbolically annihilated through frequent representations as "triad" gang members) or a generic idiom for "stereotyped." As it pertains specifically to race, symbolic annihilation means that those racial groups who are not presented as fully developed in media, be it through absence, trivialization, and condemnation, may see their social status diminished.

Scholarship focusing on the treatment of blacks in media has relied quite heavily on this definition of racial symbolic annihilation, although the concept is not always explicitly referenced. To illustrate, Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie (1997) describe blacks as being ignored, stereotyped, or demeaned by media; their criticism echoes Gerbner's and Tuchman's original definitions which include "absence" as well as "condemnation" and "trivialization." Hooks argues that African American women have experienced condemnation as they are often relegated to controlling, sexually wanton representations (see also Hill Collins, 2000). Brown (2000) suggests that African American women have experienced sexualized condemnation as they are often regarded to control media's exploitations of blacks.

Columbia and Chivers Yochim (in press) conclude that the concept is not without limitations. In their critique of the concept, Means and Coleman (2000) claim that their analysis of race is to face the study of the treatment of blacks in media, i.e., the concept of the symbolic annihilation is not viable. The authors argue that media has a step further, condemning the zoot-suiters by reporting "these are the type of exuberant youth that Hitler found useful" (p. 79). Therefore, both the soldiers and the media added a rhetorical dimension to the expanding imagistic-centered definition of symbolic annihilation. In reality, a relatively bloodless "riot" occurred, which was purposefully ignored by media (i.e., an "absence").

Others have found the application of symbolic annihilation necessary in deepening our understanding of the treatment of various racial and ethnic groups in media while speculating about its impact. For instance, in 1979, Tuchman cautioned that the term should be employed carefully as, "it too has been used to advocate a naively literal notion of mimesis" (p. 533). However, the concept has become more of an existential observation (e.g., the Chinese are symbolically annihilated through frequent representations as "triad" gang members) or a generic idiom for "stereotyped." As it pertains specifically to race, symbolic annihilation means that those racial groups who are not presented as fully developed in media, be it through absence, trivialization, and condemnation, may see their social status diminished.
of the symbolic annihilation of race is still too frequently reduced in scholarship to "bad representations," and thus cannot illuminate more complex representational issues. For example, the authors cite the television series "The Cosby Show" as provoking intense debate among black viewers regarding whether the Huxtable family is a depiction of assimilationist "White Negroes." As such, concepts such as "enlightened racism" (Jhally & Lewis, 1992) or classificatory schema such as Clark's (1969) four-part racial minority participation model (nonrecognition, ridicule, regulation, and respect) are more adept at handling such nuances.

"Symbolic annihilation, as a concept, is ill-equipped to address the multifaceted concern of race within the context of scholarship on race. The casting of black figures nearly three dozen times, with some acclaim (e.g., "Homicide: Life on the Street"). It may be difficult for those involved in scholarship on race to understand the potential for representations of blackness to be viewed as positive when for blacks and other racial minorities have been highlighted in seemingly "positive" media reports as intelligent. However, while symbolic annihilation is a term used to describe representations that are more complex than simple representations of blackness, Means Coleman and Chivers (in press) note that representations of blackness, whether positive or negative, are more often seen as "Othering." Clark's (1969) four-part racial minority participation model includes a category of "regulation" which best illustrates a representational practice that the symbolic annihilation concept is unable to deal with: the abundance of protector roles (e.g., police officers) assigned to racial minorities.

Clark's model works to summarize the kinds of participation that symbolic annihilation of race is unable to recognize. As such, concepts such as "enlightened racism" (Jhally & Lewis, 1992) or classificatory schema such as Clark's (1969) four-part racial minority participation model (nonrecognition, ridicule, regulation, and respect) are more adept at handling such nuances. Enlightened racism describes the depiction of a dominant racial group by depicting certain groups as exceptional—a model minority myth. Clark's category "regulation" best illustrates a representational practice that the symbolic annihilation concept is unable to deal with: the abundance of protector roles (e.g., police officers) assigned to racial minorities.

Clark's model works to summarize the kinds of participation that symbolic annihilation of race is unable to recognize. As such, concepts such as "enlightened racism" (Jhally & Lewis, 1992) or classificatory schema such as Clark's (1969) four-part racial minority participation model (nonrecognition, ridicule, regulation, and respect) are more adept at handling such nuances. Enlightened racism describes the depiction of a dominant racial group by depicting certain groups as exceptional—a model minority myth. Clark's category "regulation" best illustrates a representational practice that the symbolic annihilation concept is unable to deal with: the abundance of protector roles (e.g., police officers) assigned to racial minorities.
Shaheen (2001) notes the representational absence and condemnation of those of Arab descent in film, referring that this group is largely invisible until a terrorist or oil sheikh is needed on the set. In sum, symbolic annihilation has, thus far, been especially useful when describing representations that fit into dichotomous relationships of presence or absence and to elucidate the destructive consequences of poor or absent media attention (Means Coleman & Chivers Yochim, in press). In the future, before arriving at the provocative conclusion that a racial group has been symbolically annihilated, it may be useful for scholars to deconstruct the notion of race, which has, up to now, not been considered when exploring patterns of symbolic annihilation. Scholars should also interrogate the impact symbolic annihilation has upon groups’ social power. Most obviously, scholars should consider how these media treatments can be improved. In the end, it is up to scholars making use of the concept of the symbolic annihilation of race to go where the concept cannot – into the arena of attending to specific resistance and counterhegemonic strategies.

References


