

# **IMPACT OF *ROOTS***

## **Evidence from the National Survey of Black Americans**

**HALFORD H. FAIRCHILD**  
*University of California, Los Angeles*

**RUSSELL STOCKARD**  
*Hughes Communications, Los Angeles*

**PHILIP BOWMAN**  
*University of Michigan*

**The airing** of Alex Haley's *Roots* on eight consecutive evenings in January 1977 provided researchers with a fertile opportunity for examining the effects of broadcast television. Indeed, the resultant research on *Roots* is a heterogeneous sample of empirical approaches on media effects. For instance, research on *Roots* has examined the amount and determinants of exposure to the broadcast, the gratifications derived by viewers, and the attitudinal "effects" of the race-related programming (Surlin, 1978). Surlin's (1978) review of five studies indicated that a

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**AUTHORS' NOTE:** *Correspondence and requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. Halford H. Fairchild, Department of Psychology, UCLA, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024.*

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majority of Americans viewed at least one episode of *Roots*, and a third of these viewers saw all eight episodes. Not surprisingly, Black Americans were more consistent viewers than White Americans (Balon, 1978; Hur, 1978).

Other *Roots* research examined the long-standing "selective exposure/selective avoidance" hypothesis in mass media research (Surlin, 1981). According to this hypothesis, individuals prefer (and watch) television programs that reinforce their attitudes and avoid those that confront or challenge them. This has been especially true of race-related programming (Fairchild, forthcoming; Surlin and Cooper, 1976; Surlin and Tate, 1976; Vidmar and Rokeach, 1974).

Exposure/avoidance studies on *Roots* have had mixed results. Hur (1978) found no support for the selective exposure hypothesis when he examined the relationship between racial attitude and exposure to *Roots*. Surlin (1978, 1981), however, established a negative relationship between authoritarianism and amount of viewing; and Howard et al. (1978) reported a negative relationship between conservatism and viewer reactions to *Roots*. Finally, Ball-Rokeach et al. (1981), in an inventive field experiment conducted on the sequel to *Roots* (*Roots: The Next Generation*), found that egalitarianism was positively associated with exposure.

Concerning the enjoyment of *Roots*, virtually all of the early investigations reported that viewers were entertained by the program (Hur, 1978; Surlin, 1978), with one study reporting that whites enjoyed the series more than Blacks (Hur, 1978). Most studies also noted a tremendous amount of viewer learning, especially about slavery. Blacks and "liberals" appeared to have absorbed more information than whites or conservatives, although these group differences were small (Hur, 1978).

Most viewers reported a strong emotional involvement in *Roots*, with a dominant reaction of sadness and sympathy (Howard et al., 1978). For Black viewers, *Roots* may have stimulated an increase in Black pride and solidarity (Poindexter and Stroman, 1981). Concerning racial attitudes, *Roots* was expected to have a positive impact on white prejudice because

of the sympathetic treatment given African slavery and the fact that the presentation was from a more or less "Black perspective" (Balon, 1978; Surlin, 1978). Somewhat surprisingly, however, the accumulated evidence finds little support for actual racial attitude change (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1981; Hur and Robinson, 1978). In light of these findings on racial attitudes, it is noteworthy that several investigations found *Roots* to have an impact on interracial behaviors. Viewers discussed the program at home and at work, and a great deal of this discussion was interracial (Howard et al., 1978; Hur, 1978; Surlin, 1978).

One consistent limitation of the literature cited thus far is that Black Americans have not been adequately sampled. The only national survey on *Roots* focused primarily on white Americans, but was then "expanded" in order to include enough Black Americans for the analysis (Howard et al., 1978). This procedure created a bias in the Black sample due to racial differences in geographical location (and therefore appropriate sample designs). Most other studies that included Blacks were limited to a single city or county (Balon, 1978; Hur, 1978; Surlin, 1978) and were not designed to obtain representative Black subsamples.

Consequently, it is important to examine the influence of *Roots* on a more representative sample of Black Americans. The current investigation fills this need by reporting on the retrospective perceptions of *Roots* among a nationally representative sample of Black Americans. It was expected that demographic differences in exposure and reactions to *Roots* would reveal heterogeneity in the Black American population's use of the televised media.

## METHODOLOGY

### SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA), conducted at the University of Michigan in 1981, utilized a multi-

stage sampling procedure that was designed to ensure every Black American household an equal chance of being included in the sample (Jackson et al., 1982). As such, the NSBA is the only large-scale nationally representative survey of Black Americans ever conducted.<sup>1</sup>

Interviews were completed with 2,107 individuals with a response rate of 68%. Of this number, 2,082 (98.8%) provided answers to the two questions focusing on *Roots*. This subsample included 789 males (37.9%), 1,293 females (62.1%), and was about evenly divided between respondents residing in the South (1,107; 53.2%) and those residing in the other three regions of the nation (975; 46.8%). Respondents ranged in age from 17 to over 101, with 29.2% (n = 605) between the ages of 18 and 29, 20.8% (n = 431) between the ages of 30 and 39, 15.3% (n = 317) between the ages of 40 and 49, 14.2% (n = 294) between the ages of 50 and 59, and 20.6% (n = 427) over the age of 60.

One of the major limitations of this investigation, of course, is the fact that these respondents were surveyed several years after the original airing of the *Roots* telecast. This limitation notwithstanding, the majority of respondents provided reflections on their reactions to *Roots*, a fact that underscores the broad-range appeal and lasting impact of this landmark broadcast.

#### INSTRUMENTATION

The NSBA interview schedule was extensive, with emphases on the mental health status, attitudes, and practices of the sampled population. In addition, a number of sections of the questionnaire focused on other selected issues, including perceptions of neighborhood quality, religiosity, health status and problems, coping mechanisms, and social resources, among others. Toward the end of the questionnaire were two questions that form the basis for the current analysis. The first asked respondents to report whether or not they had watched "any of the television programs based on the book *Roots*." If they said yes to this question (overall, about 87% of them did),

respondents were then asked, "What did you like most about these programs?" This latter question was analyzed in terms of seven categories (based on codes developed after the completion of the data collection):

(1) *Affective impact*. Respondents liked the emotional impact that the program had on themselves and/or on other viewers.

(2) *Historical and educational value*. Respondents pointed to their appreciation of the historical content of the program. They felt that they "learned something" from the broadcast.

(3) *Progress*. Respondents noted how the program illustrated the progress that Blacks have made over the generations. It illustrated how Blacks have overcome adversity to survive.

(4) *Family identity*. Respondents enjoyed the depiction of Black family life, and may have felt a heightened identity with their own family.

(5) *Production quality*. Respondents liked the quality of the television production, including the acting, scripting, directing, photography, and so on.

(6) *Liked everything*. Respondents were globally positive about the program.

(7) *Negative*. Respondents reported negative perceptions or reactions to *Roots*. Individuals may not have liked the portrayal of Blacks, the portrayal of whites, the historical inaccuracies, and so on.

## RESULTS

Results are presented in two sections. First, patterns of use are examined by two demographic variables (urbanicity and

region) and four respondent variables (gender, age, education, and income). Next, respondents' reactions to *Roots* are also examined by these same grouping variables.

#### PATTERNS OF VIEWING

Table I presents the percentages of viewers and nonviewers by the demographic grouping variables listed above. Overall, the vast majority (86.6%) of the NSBA sample reported seeing at least a portion of the *Roots* series. Although males and females reported nearly equivalent levels of viewing (86.8% and 86.5%, respectively) every other comparison netted significant differences in the amount of viewing between groups. Somewhat surprisingly, respondents residing in the South reported the lowest overall levels of responding (82.9%), with the other three regions each reporting over 90% viewership. Similarly, respondents residing in rural areas reported the lowest level of viewership (77.4%) relative to near urban (87.3%) and urban (90.2%) respondents.

Consistent with the results reported above, higher-income groups reported higher rates of viewing, with differences as large as fifteen percentage points between the lowest (i.e., under \$5,000.00 annually) and highest (i.e., over \$20,000.00) income groups. Finally, age was inversely related to the rate of viewing with the lowest rates among the 50- to 59-year-old (81.3%) and the over-60 age groups (67.9%). Viewing was uniformly high (above 90%) for individuals between the ages of 18 and 49.

#### RESPONDENTS' REACTIONS

Overall, fully 37% of the sample cited historical and educational reasons for their liking the program.<sup>2</sup> In addition, nearly a fifth of the sample (17.3%) reported liking *Roots* because of its illustration of "Black progress."

As with exposure to *Roots*, each of the demographic breaks (except for gender differences) revealed a statistically significant difference between groups in their reactions to *Roots*. In

**TABLE 1**  
**Viewer Characteristics, Demography, and Watching "Roots"**

Subgroup	N	Yes	No	Chi-Square
Region	2082			28.431***
West	124	93.5	6.5	
N. E.	389	90.2	13.6	
N. C.	462	90.5	9.5	
South	1107	82.9	17.1	
Urbanicity	2082			43.487***
Urban	993	90.2	9.8	
Near Urban	651	87.3	12.7	
Rural	438	77.4	22.6	
Gender	2082			.053ns
Male	789	86.8	13.2	
Female	1293	86.5	13.5	
Age	2074			194.28***
18 - 19	78	94.9	5.1	
20 - 29	527	93.9	6.1	
30 - 39	431	94.2	5.8	
40 - 49	317	92.1	7.9	
50 - 59	294	81.3	18.7	
60 and over	427	57.9	32.1	
Education	2073			84.510***
0 - 11	911	79.0	21.0	
H.S. Grad	647	91.5	8.5	
Some College	332	95.5	4.5	
College Grad	183	91.3	8.7	
Income	1875			36.839***
Under 5K	590	82.2	17.8	
5K to 10K	540	87.9	12.1	
10K to 15K	239	91.6	8.4	
15K to 25K	217	93.5	6.5	
25K to 30K	28	100.0	0.0	
Over 30K	22	100.0	0.0	
Total Sample	2082	86.6	13.4	

\*\*\*p < .001.

terms of region and urbanicity differences, respondents in non-South regions were somewhat more likely to see the program as having historical and educational value (34.4% for the South, 39.4% for the non-South), but were somewhat less likely to see the value of the program in terms of Black progress (22.2% for the South, 12.9% for the non-South). The urbanicity

breaks revealed even more substantial differences in viewer perceptions. Here, respondents living in or near metropolitan areas were more likely to enjoy the program for historical and educational reasons (39.6% for urban, 38.3% for near urban, and 26.7% for rural) and its production quality (10.0%, 6.0%, and 5.3%, respectively), whereas rural respondents were more likely to cite "progress" (15.9%, 16.1%, and 25.2%, respectively) and a more general appreciation of everything about the program (9.0%, 7.6%, and 12.1%, respectively).

Concerning characteristics of the viewers themselves, a number of differences between groups were evident in terms of their reactions to *Roots*. Younger viewers were more likely to cite historical and educational reasons than were older viewers (39.2% for 18-19 years, 42.5% for 20-29 years, 42.8% for 30-39 years, 35.8% for 40-49 years, 25.6% for 50-59 years, and 29.1% for over 60 years). Similarly, younger viewers were more likely to like *Roots* because it stimulated an interest in their own family identities (6.8%, 5.9%, 5.7%, 3.5%, 3.8%, and 3.2%, respectively).

Income was also related to viewer reactions, with increases in income associated with increases in the percentage of viewers who cited historical and educational reasons for liking *Roots* (27.0% for those with 0-\$5,000, 36.2% for \$5,000-\$10,000, 44.1% for \$10,000-\$20,000, and 41.7% for \$20,000 and up). Higher-income viewers were also more likely to cite family identification (3.7%, 5.5%, 4.2%, and 6.0%, respectively) and/or the quality of the television production (6.3%, 7.5%, 7.8%, and 11.1%, respectively) as important in their perception of *Roots*. In addition, higher-income groups were less likely to report negative reactions to *Roots* than were lower-income groups (19.5%, 14.6%, 11.5%, and 9.8%, respectively).

Finally, respondents' educational levels were related to their perceptions of the broadcast. The findings in this area paralleled those for income: Those with higher educational backgrounds were more likely to cite historical and educational reasons (27.2% for those with 0-11 years of schooling, 37.6% for those with high school diplomas, 47.9% for those with some



college, and 54.8% for college graduates), family identification (3.7%, 5.1%, 7.1%, and 4.2%, respectively), and the quality of the production (5.2%, 8.2%, 9.6%, 13.9%, respectively); and were less likely to report negative reactions to the program (20.9%, 11.9%, 12.2%, and 5.4%, respectively).

## DISCUSSION

These findings reveal a number of consistent trends in the uses and impacts of *Roots* by the NSBA sample. The lack of gender differences was notable, both in terms of exposure and reactions to *Roots*. The homogeneity of responding among Black males and females may reflect the special (i.e., cross-gender) appeal of *Roots* for the Black population.<sup>3</sup> Overall, the vast majority of the NSBA sample reported watching at least a portion of the *Roots* series. This finding is consistent with those studies that have demonstrated a Black preference for Black-oriented programming (Allen and Bielby, 1979; Fairchild, forthcoming; Graves, 1980; Poindexter and Stroman, 1981; Roberts and Bachen, 1981), as well as those studies that have documented a very high rate of exposure to *Roots* among Black Americans (Balon, 1978; Howard et al., 1978; Hur, 1978; Surlin, 1978, 1981). This continuity in empirical findings reveals social comparison processes in media use: Individuals seek programming that includes representatives of their own group or that portrays life experiences relevant to that group.

The other findings on group membership are more difficult to interpret. Higher rates of viewing and more positive reactions to the programming were evident among non-Southerners, urban dwellers, and viewers with higher levels of education and income. This suggests that important subcultural elements of the Black American population are linked to region, urbanicity, and socioeconomic status.

The finding that Southern and rural respondents were least likely to view *Roots* and were most likely to point to negative features of the telecast was surprising in light of the accumu-

lated evidence that suggests that individuals prefer television programming that is of some personal relevance (Himmelweit, 1980). It may be that the *Roots* telecast, which depicted slave conditions primarily in the rural South, was "too close" to contemporary life conditions in that region, and southern respondents "selectively avoided" exposure to the telecast. Alternatively, it may be that the appeal and impact of *Roots* is simply related to educational and socioeconomic status levels, both of which are generally lower in rural areas and in the Southern region. Education and SES are positively related to Black Consciousness (Gurin and Epps, 1975), and Black Consciousness connotes an identification with and interest in issues related to Blacks (Burgest, 1980). *Roots*, as a historical docudrama, may have stimulated greater interest in groups higher in Black Consciousness.

Although this study was limited by the retrospective nature of the survey and the fact that only two questions were asked that examined the uses and impacts of *Roots*, the demographic analyses revealed several patterns that demonstrate the heterogeneity within the Black population regarding the use of the televised media. In addition, the salience of *Roots* for "Black Consciousness" suggests that viewers watched this epic program for reasons other than mere enjoyment. Indeed, the patterns of heaviest viewership and positive evaluations (i.e., among the younger, more highly educated, and urban subsample) are consistent with that literature suggesting higher levels of Black Consciousness in this population subgroup. Future research must recognize the heterogeneity within the Black American population, and examine the mediating influences of personality variables that tap identity formation, such as Black Consciousness.

## NOTES

1. Correspondence concerning the National Survey of Black Americans should be addressed to Philip Bowman, The Institute for Social Research, P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

2. Data tables are available from the first author, Department of Psychology, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

3. Findings on the white population, in contrast, have suggested higher use and more positive evaluations of *Roots* among females.

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*Halford H. Fairchild is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. His research interests include race relations, mass media, and Black psychology. He is the President-Elect of the Association of Black Psychologists.*

*Russell Stockard is a Manager of Business Planning at Security Pacific Data Transmission Corporation, Glendale, CA.*

*Philip Bowman is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Illinois, Champaign.*