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# Man without a country: how character complexity primes racial stereotypes

Ben Miller

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*, [bmill45@lsu.edu](mailto:bmill45@lsu.edu)

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MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY: HOW CHARACTER COMPLEXITY PRIMES RACIAL  
STEREOTYPES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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In

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by  
Ben Miller  
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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to Meghan Erkkinen. I would never have attended LSU without you in my life, much less have completed this thesis project. You are a constant support for everything I do, and I know I can take on anything with you by my side.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the role character complexity plays in racial attitudes of television viewers. Previous research suggests that stereotypes and counter-stereotypes play vastly different roles in how people process information. Stereotypes act as automatic cues that call up pre-made judgments upon exposure to them. Meanwhile, counter-stereotypes actually work on a conscious processing level, forcing viewers to think more deeply about individuals when presented with them, skipping the automatic recall mechanism all together. By layering counter-stereotypes and stereotypes together in the same stimulus, this study examined whether the existence of there would be an appreciable difference between viewers exposed to solely stereotypes or both using both implicit and explicit measures.

To investigate the relationships between character complexity and racial attitudes, this study used a 2 x 2 factorial experimental design featuring 99 students and the data was analyzed using factorial ANOVAs. In addition to the character complexity variable, an additional exposure variable measured differences between single or repeated exposures of the stimulus videos. This experiment used an Implicit Association Test, a Positive Attitudes Towards Blacks scale and a Black Stereotypes scale to measure racial attitudes. Findings show there was no difference in positive, negative or implicit attitudes between the two complexity conditions. And furthermore, there was also no demonstrated difference between the single- and repeated-exposure conditions.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In season three of the critically-acclaimed HBO television show *The Wire*, drug kingpin Avon Barksdale says to his long-time partner in crime and childhood friend Stringer Bell:

You know the difference between me and you? I bleed red and you bleed green. I look at you these days, String, you know what I see? I see a man without a country. Not hard enough for this right here and maybe, just maybe, not smart enough for them out there (Season 3, Episode 8).

What Barksdale did not realize was that he was telling the audience why Bell's conflicted drug-dealer-in-a-business-suit persona offers a chance for study. Bell is both stereotypical, as an African American living the criminal lifestyle and working in the drug trade in inner-city Baltimore, and counter-stereotypical, as a community college student with ambitions in real estate and politics. Bordering on both the business and drug worlds, Bell truly is a man without a country.

In his book *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, Martin Gilens (1999) argued that the types of images associated with news stories can have a major impact on the way people think about certain issues. Drawing on literature involving priming and stereotyping, he showed a connection between the race of people shown in images of the poor and the tone of the articles associated. For example, a story that portrays a negative tone about poverty would often be accompanied by photos of poor Blacks, while positive stories about poverty would show pictures of Whites. He writes:

It would seem that Americans' misperceptions of the racial composition of both the public as a whole and poor people in particular reflect the nature of the media images that surround us ... People do draw on other sources of information and imagery about the social world, but it would be hard to deny that the news media are a centrally important source in a society as large and "media-centric" as our own. When news reports offer misleading images, it is inevitable that public perceptions and reality will diverge (p. 138-39).

The media act as powerful mediators between reality and public opinion, and that sets up a potentially dangerous proposition. As Iyengar and Kinder (1987) write in *News that Matters*, “[b]y calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged” (p. 63). It is important to study the media closely and understand the effects it has on our attitudes, racial and otherwise.

A lot of work has been done in the area of how the media prime stereotypes. Some of the research (i.e. Gilens, 1999; Iyengar & Kinder, 1982) has examined this issue by comparing news coverage to public opinion polls surrounding that coverage. Others (i.e. Valentino, 1999; Hutchins & White, 2002) have demonstrated, through psychological attitude tests and surveys, how the priming of racial cues explicitly affects attitudes in an experimental context. For the purposes of this research project, I want to explore the latter type of research. I intend to take the ideas that Gilens presents and investigate it in the world of entertainment media. I want to explore how exposing viewers to stereotypical and counter-stereotypical depictions of characters can directly affect both implicit and explicit attitudes. Valentino, Hutchings and White (2002) found that “counter-stereotypic cues—especially those implying blacks are deserving of government resources—dampen racial priming, suggesting that the meaning drawn from the visual/narrative pairing in an advertisement, and not simply the presence of black images, triggers the effect” (p. 75). Studies like those done by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) and Valentino et al. (2002) begin to tell the story of stereotypes in the media, but the news is not the only place that provides stereotypes for us to process.

Understanding the effects of entertainment media has become more and more important as we have evolved into a more “information society” (Vorderer, Klimmt & Ritterfeld, 2004).

When users become involved in media they temporarily lose awareness of the fact that they are actually interacting with a mediated environment (Lee, 2004; Vorderer & Hartman, 2009). This is important because it allows the user to gain insight from the mediated exposure that can affect their subsequent judgments (Zillmann, 1988). Users are then more likely to remain in the fictional media world if they find it to be more interesting and enjoyable than the real-live world in which they actually reside (Vorderer & Hartman, 2009). Involvement is a key concept for understanding how we interact with entertainment media, but there is another mode of media viewing that is referred to as analytical mode (Vorderer, 1993). When a viewer is in the analytical mode, they are viewing the media from the outside looking in which they view events in a more real world context (Vorderer, 1993; Tan, 1996). Sometimes users can even shift from being involved to analytical mode during the same viewing experience (Vorderer & Hartman, 2009). Studying what keeps viewers involved and how that affects their subsequent actions plays a role in deepening our understanding of the effects of entertainment media.

Researchers over the years have examined what causes the accessibility of judgments caused by media exposure (Busselle & Shrum, 2003). Information that people have more readily available in their minds is most likely to be used in subsequent judgment construction than any other types of information that a person's brain might possess (Taylor & Fiske, 1978; Wyer & Srull, 1989). Furthermore, it has been found that information consumed by viewers in the form of exemplars (which paint information in a more vivid form) is more likely to influence judgments than less vivid examples (Shrum, 2009). Shrum (2009) writes that "more vivid or frequent examples are easier to remember than less vivid or infrequent examples and thus tend to be used to construct judgments" (Shrum, 2009, pg. 55). It has been demonstrated that media present most of its information through exemplars in both news reports and fictional media

(Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). The connection between the involvement of media and the presence of exemplars looms large over the way media suck us in and adjust our attitudes.

Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) introduced a model of narrative engagement that explains the importance of engagement in entertainment media. The model is formed around four central factors: identification, transportation, telepresence and perceived realism. Those four factors shape the way we understand how people engage with narrative media, but for the purposes of this thesis, identification and perceived realism offer more applicability than the other two factors. The importance of narrative engagement centers on findings suggesting viewers who are more engaged by narrative material are more likely to have shifted beliefs that fall into line with the stimulus (i.e. Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Green & Brock, 2000; Green, 2004). Bilandzic and Busselle (2011) characterize identification as “the process by which we can simulate in our minds what we read or view” (pg. 31). Oatley (1994) described the effects of identification as though “[e]motions ... are mediated by a psychological process in which the reader ... takes on characteristics of the fictional character” (pg. 64). In other words, the viewer adopts the goals and feels the emotions of the fictional character they are watching. Being able to immerse yourself in the world and outlook of a character allows for a shift of beliefs in a way that are more in line with the character’s thinking because you are more likely to deal with the information present in the narrative more closely than someone who is less engaged (Slater, 2002). Perceived realism, on the other hand, is less about becoming immersed in the narrative as it is about staying engaged with it. Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) wrote that “[n]arrative experiences such as transportation, identification and telepresence suffer when attention is drawn away from processing the narrative from an inside point of view to thinking about the narrative as an artificial construct from a perspective outside of the narrative” (pg. 33). A reader or viewer

needs to be able to accept events that happen in a narrative as realistic within the context of both their real world experiences and the world of the narrative itself (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009).

This thesis wants to understand if and how the complexity of a television character can adjust the way viewers think about the world around them. Identification demonstrates that media can cause viewers to relate to the world through a character's eyes — in a way that may be foreign to them — and the presence of perceived realism can keep them in that mindset during the entire viewing experience. It is after that engagement has been achieved that the mechanisms of character complexity can begin to change someone's thinking.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Priming**

In order to examine characters in storytelling media, it is important to understand how those characters affect the individuals watching them. This thesis looks at characters in the way that they prime individuals' racial attitudes. This chapter will explain priming as a concept with a focus on mental models, which is the primary approach to priming used in this study.

In simple terms, priming refers to “the effect of some preceding stimulus or event on how we react, broadly defined, to some subsequent stimulus” (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2009, p. 74). The preceding stimulus for the purposes of this thesis is exposure to media, as is the case in research involving media priming. In the discipline of mass communication, media priming is primarily examined in three different areas: violence in the media, political news coverage and stereotyping in the media (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., 2009).

In order to fully understand the concept of priming, a look at its origins is required. Social psychologists believe that memory is made up of interconnected pathways that strengthen concepts based on their similarity to one another (Josephson, 1987). In other words, when the brain absorbs two ideas that are very similar to one another, it compartmentalizes them together so that when someone remembers one of those ideas, the other one is brought to memory as well. Berkowitz (1986) defined a “priming effect” as the “way in which the media-reported material increases the accessibility of other semantically related ideas (raising the likelihood that these thoughts will come to mind), and also activates associated feelings and action tendencies” (p. 95). In other words, Berkowitz' understanding of the human brain represents it as a series of nodes that are connected together by what are termed “associative pathways” (Sharifian & Samani, 1997). When an image or thought is conjured or presented, it travels through the

associative pathways to activate other similar ideas, leading to increased salience of otherwise unmentioned ideas (Collins & Loftus, 1975). Because of the connections that people's minds possess between related topics, how someone reacts to a media message will be dependent on the information they already have regarding that topic.

Schemas, a popular concept in psychology, provide a basis for how priming works cognitively. Graber (1988) defines schema as "a cognitive structure consisting of organized knowledge about situations and individuals that has been abstracted from prior experiences" (p. 28 as cited by Sevrin & Tankard, 2001, p. 82). Basically, schemas use nodes in our brain that allow us to sort information to make it easier to recall later. Schemas are the conduits for priming in the network model perspective as described by Price and Tewksbury (1997). Schemata factor into priming because as an individual is exposed to a stimulus, that exposure causes the individual's mind to send messages down the "associative pathway" mentioned previously. Those messages then cause the activation of different, but related, groups of schemata, and that activation effect causes information related to the stimulus to be more readily available (salient) in the mind of an individual. Schemata, in this understanding, are core factors in the activation of the priming effect.

Though Berkowitz said that these priming effects were temporary, he still believed that their impacts were important over time. He built his ideas off of the work of previous scholars who defined cognitive-neoassociationist theories. Those theories (Anderson & Bower, 1973; Landman & Manis, 1983) examined incidents of aggression linked to previously exposed stimuli. For example, Anderson, Anderson and Deuser (1996) demonstrated that exposure to photos of weapons increased aggression-related thoughts, while higher-level temperatures did not. Aggression-related studies were the foundation of early priming research. How someone

reacts to a message is in large part influenced by what information in their cognitive pathways they bring with them to the consumption of that message. People can be primed to think differently about a subject and interact with it in a different way (as cited in Berkowitz, 1984). In other words, how someone reacts to media is informed by the information they have already received on that subject, and exposure to those messages causes similar ideas to become more prominent and readily accessible in their minds.

Bargh (1999) said that “[p]riming serves the important function of keeping us in touch with our surroundings by calling up a rich base of information derived from past experience, which is stored in our memories” (para. 8). As a result, priming can affect the way an individual feels about, and interacts with, an object, but it can also affect that individual’s behavior. “Once something that we perceive has activated a mental concept, the concept stays active for a while. During this period, it can affect our thoughts and decisions, even if they are entirely unrelated to whatever activated the concept in the first place” (Bargh, 1999, para. 9).

When dealing with priming, accessibility plays a major role in the recall mechanisms of priming. Higgins, Rholes and Jones (1977) demonstrated one of the first examples of the role accessibility plays with a study that exposed participants to the words “persistent” and “stubborn.” After being exposed to the word, study members were asked to read a paragraph about a task performed by another person and then indicate what they felt that person’s behavior was. The study found that participants were much more likely to use the phrase they were exposed to earlier. Higgins et al. (1977) showed that accessibility played a major role in how people make subsequent judgments. Though scholars such as Srull and Wyer (1979) have demonstrated that most priming effects fade over time, even within as short of a time as 24 hours, the higher frequency a person is exposed to a prime, the more accessible that prime

becomes (Higgins, 1996). A more recent prime can have a powerful effect as Higgins, Bargh and Lombardi (1985) demonstrated that a prime with a short delay before judgment can override generally more accessible idea, the longer a person goes from viewing the priming stimulus, the more they fall back on more frequently primed constructs. Thus, accessibility plays a major role in how we recall information, and the more often we are exposed to certain constructs, the more likely we are to use those constructs to make judgments. Those constructs are important when viewing examining priming as a simple activation mechanism and, as the next section discusses, in creating and recalling mental models.

While the “associative pathways” model of priming was the entry point for researchers into the priming concept (Berkowitz, 1986), other, more dynamic, models have cropped up in the literature since (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Davies, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2004).

### Mental Models

This thesis uses a mental models approach to understanding priming, which is another, more recent, way that researchers have approached the concept. “Mental models are dynamic representations of situations, events and objects” (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2004, p. 345).

Essentially, individuals cognitively create and use the mental models as a way to process information, make social judgments and formulate predictions about future events (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., 2009, p. 84).

Schemata can be considered building blocks for mental models, but the mental models themselves differ by eschewing the pathway activation that schemata use (Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998). Mental models essentially represent knowledge of an event or situation, and they are most often used in examining media effects (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., 2009, p. 85). Schemata allow mental models to exist by acting as the template for how we interpret events that occur around us

(D'Andrade, 1992, 1993). Schemata categorize information together, so that single, separated events may be connected in our mind, so for example schemata may categorize all horror films into the same category in a very abstract manner (D'Andrade, 1993). So continuing the horror example, schemata can then fill in the blanks if we miss a plot detail so that it makes sense with regards to other films in that category (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., 2009). Mental models build on the templates provided by schemata in order to place experiences in space and time that make them less abstract (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., 2009). Therefore, schemata may provide us plot details to horror films (such as the killer eventually being defeated in the end), but mental models go a step further by allowing us to understand the same narratives in terms of when and where they take place, rather than just providing generic details. While watching media, people are constantly subconsciously interpreting and evaluating what they are seeing based on information such as the characters involved, and the time and place that the story is occurring (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., 2009, p. 85). Mental models allow people to approach what they are watching from a number of different angles. They are “runable,” which means people can input different specifications and envision how things would be different when those circumstances change (Williams, Hollan, & Stevens, 1983, p. 133). For example, someone familiar with the film *Star Wars* could, in their minds, replace Luke Skywalker and Han Solo with Captain Kirk and Spock from *Star Trek* to play out how they would react to the *Star Wars* plotline. That creates a dynamic model of events that allows an individual to better understand the situation than the associative pathways approach does, and allows the viewer to go into more depth than the simple activation of a schema would do (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., 2009, p. 85). Priming from a mental models perspective purports that an entire mental model would be activated by the priming effect (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., 2009, p. 84-86).

Schemata represent a significant difference from the more traditional “associative pathways” model. Mental models differ in three distinct ways that could help us better understand the process of priming. First, the components within a mental model are interchangeable, allowing heightened accessibility of related concepts (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., p. 85-86). Rather than simply being the activation of related schemata, mental models allow an individual to take related concepts and ideas and plug them into the stimulus they are viewing. Priming doesn’t just activate concepts, it activates the ability to think about, and more fully understand them as well. Secondly, mental models are dynamic and able to be used by the individual for purposes such as predicting future events (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., p. 85-86). When an individual is primed, they now have something new to “play with” in their minds. The individual can watch an episode of a television show and use the plot as a basis for predicting future events or understanding people and situations. And finally, schemata are situated in time and contextualized — as time passes, the usefulness of mental models fades (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., p. 86). Rather than the priming effect fading because of the deactivation of associative pathways over time, mental models fade because their usefulness diminishes because of their contextual nature. The mental model can be applied, if relevant, during a longer timeframe than associative pathways priming, even lasting weeks in some cases (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., p. 86). As time goes on, the ability to use the mental model fades and its importance diminishes. These three differences create a deeper understanding of a priming process and paints a more vibrant picture of how individuals react to media stimuli. Mental models go beyond activation and actually allow for manipulation and a higher level of understanding.

Wyer and Radvansky (1999) suggested that television and film may be a primary source for creating mental models. They write: “It nevertheless seems incontrovertible that by far the

greatest proportion of people's social knowledge concerns specific situations that they directly observe, see in movies or on television, read about, or hear others describe” (Wyer & Radvansky, 1999, p. 98).

This study views priming as a mechanism for activating mental models. Because the focus of this study is on character complexity, mental models are important to understanding character complexity. In order for character complexity to have an impact on attitudes, individuals would need to do deeper thinking and analysis of a character. In the “associative pathways” model, a multi-dimensional character would be less likely to cause a change in attitude because the exposure to the initial, one-dimensional (and in this case stereotypical) portrayals would activate related concepts that the more “complex” aspects of the character would not be able to deactivate. In other words, because “associative pathway” priming is significantly less dynamic, an episode of a television show may activate a negative stereotype about a character that may then supersede any positive counter-stereotypes the episode may present later on.

#### Priming in Political Communication

In political communication, researchers look at priming as a function of agenda setting. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) argued that priming worked "by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged” (p. 63). A lot of the research examined how presidential approval ratings inform public opinion (Kim & McCombs, 2007). Priming in political communication is a component of broader agenda-setting theory. “Agenda-setting is observed when consumers of news media see as the nation's most important problems

those issues given more prominent attention by media outlets” (Holbrook & Hill, 2005, p. 277-76). In that regard, Iyengar, Peters & Kinder (1982) summed up their view of priming this way:

Consider, for example, that early in a presidential primary season, the national press becomes fascinated by a dramatic international crisis, at the expense of covering worsening economic problems at home. One consequence may be that the public will worry more about the foreign crisis and less about economic woes: classic agenda setting. But in addition, the public's evaluation of the president may now be dominated by this apparent success in the handling of the crisis; his management (or mismanagement) of the economy may now count for rather little. Our point here is simply that fluctuations in the importance of evaluation standards may well depend on fluctuations in the attention each receives in the press (p. 849).

In more recent studies of political communication, priming has been evaluated in regards to movies, crime dramas, late-night talk shows, and the evaluation of political candidates other than the president (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., 2009, p. 77). Holbrook and Hill (2005), for example, examined television crime dramas as a source of political information and demonstrated that watching those types of programs elevates concerns about crime as a national issue and informs the consumer's evaluation of the president. Also, Holbert, Pillion, Tschida, Armfield, Kinder, Cheery and Daulton (2003) demonstrated that viewing the NBC program *The West Wing* primed audience members to have a more positive view of the office of the President of the United States, and, as a result, caused higher evaluations of the sitting president. Political priming has spread beyond just the evaluation of the President in recent years as well, with other political candidates being examined on various factors as well (i.e. Weber & Thorton, 2012; Schaffner, 2005; Druckman, 2004). For example, Schaffner (2005) examined 30 senate campaigns from 2000 and determined that when women's issues were emphasized in a campaign (by both Republican and Democratic candidates), females voters were more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate.

For the purposes of this thesis, priming in political communication is a minor, but important, piece of the priming puzzle. Though the narrative media being used in this study are not setting the agenda in a traditional way, they could potentially be setting the agenda of attitudes regarding race. By examining character portrayals in this way, it helps to deepen the understanding of how those portrayals can create a broader social agenda, as opposed to a specific political one dealing with presidents and opinion polls.

### Priming and Stereotypes

Finally, and most relevant to this study, researchers have examined priming repeatedly in relation to stereotypes. Gender and race have been the primary avenues of interest in research of this type (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., 2009, p. 77). Priming studies have repeatedly shown that exposure to racial stereotypes can lead to real-world consequences by increasing the likelihood of an individual using those stereotypes to make evaluations about the world and color the way they interact with others (Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz & Behm-Morawitz, 2009). One of the important first studies in this category was an examination of rock music videos by Hansen and Hansen (1988). They found that exposure to music videos that include stereotypical portrayals of men and women led to an impression of a more stereotypical interaction between a man and a woman in a second, unrelated tape. Participants found the woman to be less dominant when exposed to the music videos, showing the stereotypical priming in action in a gender-related area (Hansen & Hansen, 1988).

Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) hypothesized that the script for crime in local television news coverage included two components: crime is violent and the perpetrators of those crimes are not White. In their study, they found that the radicalized approach increased “punitive approaches to crime” and leads to the increased use of stereotypes among White viewers. The analysis done by

Gilliam and Iyengar was expanded by a number of researchers over the last decade. Studies have shown that crime reporting featuring more African American suspects than White suspects can activate the “black criminal” stereotype (Dixon, 2006; Gilliam & Iyengar, 1998, 2000; Gilliam et al., 1996; Peffley et al., 1996; Valentino, 1999). Dixon (2006) showed that exposure to African American criminals in newscasts increased a participant’s support of the death penalty, and Abraham and Appiah (2006) found that exposure to African American photos in newscasts led to stereotypical evaluations of African Americans in regards to crime education policies.

Media stereotypes are easily accessible and can influence decision making without conscious effort. Stereotyping and priming go hand in hand in a lot of research, but stereotypes can have long-lasting implications that extend beyond the short-term effects that priming has shown to cause. These cumulative effects can influence real-world beliefs about racial/ethnic out groups (Ramasubramanian, 2010). "Repeated exposure to stereotypical information makes stereotypes frequently and readily accessible" and more easily primed (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007). Exposure to even a few media impressions can have a major impact on our attitudes towards certain issues and the way we interact with other social groups (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007). Studies by Dixon and Maddox (2005) and Oliver et al. (2004) demonstrate that criminal behavior on the part of African Americans is stereotypically linked to the physical attributes of skin color and Afrocentric features.

The relationship between stereotypes and priming is one of the most important facets of this thesis. As discussed in the next chapter, the concept of character complexity is built upon the notion that a character that portrays stereotypical and counter-stereotypical traits may provide a more complete and deep understanding about that character and the racial (or otherwise) group that they belong to. Creating mental models that feature a strong basis for understanding the

differences between different racial groups may be key in understanding how character portrayals both positively and negatively affect the attitudes of television (and other media) viewers.

## **Stereotypes**

In order to properly evaluate character complexity as a dichotomy between stereotypical and counter-stereotypical traits, an understanding of stereotypes is necessary. Ford and Tonander (1998) characterized the basic function of stereotypes as a way to “simplify the process of understanding others by providing information about individuals based on group membership” (p. 372). They claimed that stereotypes were a way to reduce the amount of information an individual needs in order to interact with their social environment. Stereotypes play their biggest role in creating a distinction between groups by focusing on the difference between them (Ford & Tonander, 1998). Similarly, Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (1987) defined stereotyping as “a fixed mental image of a group that is frequently applied to all its members” (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008). In essence, stereotypes function as simple cues to aid the understanding of different groups. Much of the work on stereotyping originated in the social psychology realm and that scholarship suggests that there is an “insidiousness and inevitability of stereotypes and prejudice even for the well-intended” (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008, pg. 185). However, the term stereotype originated in Walter Lippmann’s often-cited book, *Public Opinion*, in 1922. He wrote:

The systems of stereotypes may be the core of our personal tradition, the defenses of our position in society. They are an ordered more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves. They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world, people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members (p. 52).

Though Lippmann's definition of stereotypes is different from how it is used today, he created what scholars have been building on for more than a century since.

Stereotypes factor heavily into cultivation research, which says that individuals who spend more time watching television are more likely to relate to the world based on the most common images received, compared to those who watch less television (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009). Dalisay and Tan (2009) write in regards to cultivation theory that "as individuals are exposed to stereotypical portrayals of racial groups through the media, specifically through TV, individuals acquire stereotypes that are congruent to the ways the groups are portrayed" (pg. 8).

### Racial Stereotypes

Gilens (1999) tackled stereotypes in *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*. Gilens examined stereotypes in relation to the news media's tendency to place pictures of African Americans next to stories that represent negative depictions of poverty, while pictures of Whites were placed next to stories about poverty that were either uplifting in nature or supposed to evoke empathy for the poor. He defined stereotypes as "exaggerated or wholly erroneous generalizations about specific social groups" (Gilens, p. 7). His primary argument was that antipoverty programs that are not seen as "rewards for the lazy" are more popular than the more traditional and stereotypical portrayals of programs such as welfare and Medicaid (Gillens, 1999). Gilens also points out that the function of stereotypes in society can be self-interested in nature:

The stereotype of blacks as lazy was already discussed as a justification for slavery, and the same stereotype now serves to justify the continued social and economic inequalities between blacks and whites. Similarly, stereotypes of immigrants are used to justify cutbacks in the government benefits available to legal immigrants (Gilens, 162).

Gilens' depiction of stereotypes paints a grave picture about their impact and use in society, a danger that the media constantly increases.

Stereotyping literature in the mass communication discipline looks at the subject from a variety of angles. A number of studies examine stereotypes' impact on gender roles while others analyze them from a race relations basis. Both categories use film and news media to examine their effect, with researchers digging more heavily into news. Dixon (2008) argues that local media news coverage portrays people of color in a criminality frame (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b; Entman, 1992; Romer, Jamieson & de Coteau, 1998), and those types of portrayals can activate stereotypes that are then subsequently used for judgments (Dixon, 2006a, 2006b; Gilliam & Iyengar, 1998, 2000; Oliver & Fonash, 2002). In his study, Dixon (2008) found that exposure to network news decreased estimates of African American income, while increasing the endorsement of African American stereotypes. Overall, media use has been determined to play a meaningful role in the development of stereotypes and intergroup behaviors (Mastro, 2009).

#### African Americans on Television

Important to this study is research concerning television portrayals of African American stereotypes. Recent research has examined stereotypes in regards to Asian Americans (Dalisy & Tan, 2009; Zhang, 2010), Latinas (Merskin, 2007; McGrath, 2007) and homosexual couples (Ivory, Gibson & Ivory, 2007). However, much of the research has examined African Americans as the primary targets for stereotyping. In the beginning of African American portrayals on television, they were largely found in supporting roles, but that has changed over the last 20 years (Greenberg, Mastro & Brand, 2009). "Although analyses of entertainment programming in the 1990s suggest that Blacks have achieved equivalence with regard to the number of roles, the quality and variety remain debatable" (Greenberg et al., 2009, p. 336). The composition of

African Americans on television is nearly exclusively in sitcoms and crime dramas. In sitcoms, African Americans appear in predominantly Black casts, while in dramas, the ensemble is often mixed race (Mastro, 2009). Mastro (2009) described African Americans depicted on television this way:

In terms of the manner in which Black Americans are depicted on television, the typical Black character on primetime is a middle-class male in his thirties. He is likely to be a law enforcer or professional, discussing work related topics ... This character enjoys moderate levels of both job and social authority ... and is among the least aggressive figures on TV ... However, Black Americans on primetime are also characterized by more provocative and less professional dress than their White counterparts (p. 330).

Those types of portrayals, along with frequent criminal stereotypes found in the news, point toward incomplete representations of African Americans in all types of media.

This study will examine stereotypes from an activation perspective, which purports that when someone is exposed to a stereotype, it is then activated and more likely to be used for “subsequent judgments” (Dixon, 2006). The frequent activation of a particular stereotype causes an increased reliance on those stereotypes along with the brain deemphasizing other, related ideas in favor of the stereotypic ones (Dixon, 2006). In other words, reliance on heuristics to make decisions and interact with others will cause individuals to emphasize stereotypes over time with repeated exposure and use. Television increases exposure by having many episodes per season and many seasons per series, so the overuse of stereotypes in a television program will constantly be reinforcing those stereotypes. For that reason, exposure was examined. The heuristic processing model demonstrates that the way a person understands their social reality can be impacted by frequent television exposure because they are more likely to rely on heuristics (Riddle, 2010; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). In her study, Riddle (2010) examined violence in police dramas and found that participants exposed to more violence gave more

pessimistic answers to questions about the prevalence of crime in reality, as compared to those who were exposed to less. The chronic activation of stereotypes becomes very important from a mental models perspective because chronically viewing media that purports stereotypes could cause individuals to create mental models built on those stereotypes. Thus, when activated, the individual would interpret their world through that lens.

### **Character Complexity and Counter-Stereotypes**

Though this thesis is viewed through the more common lens of priming using the mental models approach, character complexity is the most important concept to this research. Character complexity is currently a less-examined approach to understanding media characters and offers a lot of interesting possibilities to help us understand how media creators should be proceeding with their content. This chapter explains character complexity, and then details stereotypes and attitudes in more specific ways.

#### Counter-Stereotypic portrayals

Valentino et al. (2002) demonstrated that portraying African Americans in a counter-stereotypical way can lessen the priming effects later demonstrated by an individual. He wrote: “counter-stereotypical cues do not make racial attitudes more accessible but, instead, may induce conscious processing of the racial content of the message, thereby increasing the self-reported importance of groups” (pg. 87). By presenting Black individuals in a manner differing from the norm, people process their attitudes at a more conscious level, rather than simply activating easily accessible attitudes based on stereotypes. Power, Murphy and Coover (1996) found similar results, demonstrating that being presented with counter-stereotypical representations caused participants to assign blame to situational and external factors to media events related to African

American, whereas exposure to stereotypical representations caused them to blame internal factors or personal attributes for the events.

Ramasubramanian and Oliver (2007) explored how media exemplars affect participant's evaluations of different races and demonstrated a fine line that media creators must follow to limit racial hostilities. Their results demonstrated that exposure to counter-stereotypes concerning Asian Indians reduced hostilities, compared to reading stereotypical stories, while there was no effect on African Americans in the same conditions. However, Ramasubramanian (2011) explored the concept of counter-stereotype media exemplars and African Americans further. She performed an experiment to distinguish whether exposing participants to stereotypical versus counter-stereotypical exemplars changed the way they felt about affirmative action. Consistent with previous research, participants demonstrated more positive feelings towards African Americans and affirmative action when presented with the counter-stereotypical media exemplars than with the stereotypical ones. Ramasubramanian (2011) wrote that "[e]ntertainment scholars have long suggested that fictional narratives can be quite persuasive, but this idea has not yet been experimentally validated in the context of support for race-related policy decision making" (pg. 510).

For the purposes of this thesis, flat characters are represented as "stereotypical" in nature. By being solely stereotypical, the character is by definition flat. In other words, stereotypical characters are defined on that single dimension of what makes them stereotypical (i.e. an African American committing a crime). Because stereotypes are simple heuristics used to make differentiations between groups, a stereotype will lack complex aspects to their personality. Complex characters, on the other hand, are represented in this thesis as both "stereotypic" and "counter-stereotypic." In this case, the character is not defined by a single characteristic, but

rather represents the stereotype and the embodiment of the counter-stereotype. By possessing multiple representations, the character is essentially multi-dimensional at its core.

By being African American in a story about crimes and drugs, Stringer Bell sets the audience up to understand him as either a cop or a criminal — in this case, Bell is a drug dealer. However, by layering the ways in which Bell is different from other Black criminal characters on the show (through his interest in attending college and real estate, specifically) he can be seen as complex. He is both a stereotype and a counter-stereotype at the same time.

Character complexity is essential to the mental models approach to priming that this thesis uses. The complexity of Bell's character in *The Wire* allows the viewer to construct the mental model in a deeper and more complicated way. Rather than focusing solely on his stereotypic characteristics, the complexity of Bell's personality and actions can force viewers to interpret him more deeply than a flat character would. In other words, viewers build and adjust their mental models around the fact that Bell represents opposite sides of the same coin. He forces them to understand him as both a stereotype and as something more.

### Character Complexity

The most important concept being investigated in this thesis is the idea of “character complexity.” When evaluating fictional media, such as a television series, audience members remember characters. Specifically in television, because the plots of shows are constantly changing, characters act as an entry way for the audience and inform their memories of the show (Evans, 2008). “Whereas, in terms of prolonged engagement with a drama, narratives can begin to merge and become indistinguishable from each other, characters are easier to identify and recall” (Evans, 2008, p. 203). As a result, the dynamism of a character plays a significant role in how audience members consume and remember television programs. Overall, not a lot of work

has been done to examine how characters that are defined by multiple attributes affect the viewers' perceptions of those characters. By doing that, this thesis treads on fertile ground that could potentially lead to a deeper understanding of media characters and priming mechanisms.

E.M. Forster first established the difference between 'flat' and 'round' characters in his book *Aspects of the Novel* (Culpeper, 2000). Forster describes a flat character as someone who "[i]n their purest form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality; when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round," while continuing to define a round character as one that is not flat (p. 73, as cited by Culpeper, 2000, p. 298). From that definition, Culpeper (2000) identifies three dimensions of flat and round characters: "(1) whether the character is simple or complex, (2) whether the character is static or changes, and (3) whether the character 'surprises' the reader or not" (p. 298). A character with complex emotions that evolves over the course of the story is defined as a round character, while a character whose actions fail to surprise the reader can be identified as flat. In other words, characters are defined as complex (or round) when they are multi-dimensional, change over time and surprise the reader or viewer, while flat (or static) characters are built on a single idea and do not change over time or offer significant depth into their personalities or motives.

Recent research into character complexity can be found in the form of "moral violations." Building on Raney's (2004) ideas that media audience members use schemas to understand characters, specifically those that are differentiated along moral evaluations of good and bad, Eden, Oliver, Tamborini, Woolley and Limperos (2009) examined the application of Haidt's Moral Foundation Theory (MFT) to media characters. They argue that perceptions of morality are crucial to the way a viewer interprets a character. MFT proposes five segments of moral judgments, which are: Authority/Respect, Harm/Care, Fairness/Reciprocity, Ingroup/Loyalty,

and Purity/Sanctity (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). According to Eden et al. (2009), audience members use those segments to evaluate good and evil characters according to their actions. Though moral violations do not specifically lend themselves to the work being done in this thesis, they deepen the understanding of the impact of character complexity. As MFT research proposes that perceptions of morality shape the way viewers perceive a character, it suggests that depth of character plays an important role in the evaluation of media. The ability to gauge moral evaluations depends on how complex the character and their surrounding situations are. A media character cannot violate five different segments of morality without first displaying those to the viewer.

Current media uses cues developed from previous media to inform the consumer and encode messages. In the case of characters, that involves relying on archetypes that have previously been established in prior books, movies and television series (Kukkonen, 2008). Kukkonen (2008) provides the example of how a man with a “black shirt and a moustache” signifies to the audience that he is the villain of the story (p. 261). Our instant understanding of the signal, conveyed through previous media exposure helps us better understand the story without spending time in the narrative to set that up. However, character complexity can add an additional layer to that proposition. Previous media exposure may reveal instantly to viewers that a black man is more likely to commit a crime than a white man is, but the complexity of the issues requires closer examination. Showing a black man committing said crime may act to reinforce the previous cue/stereotype, but developing a deeper understanding of that character can create a dichotomy that not only forces the viewer to reexamine the situation but to also reexamine their understanding of the media cue itself.

## **Implicit and Explicit Attitudes**

Attempting to measure attitudes requires a brief understanding of attitudes. For the purposes of this thesis, attitudes will be measured in two different ways: implicitly and explicitly. Gordon Allport (1954) explained that attitudes as a concept are “probably the most distinctive and indispensable in contemporary American social psychology” (p. 4, as cited by Severin & Tankard, 1992). Severin and Tankard (2001) provide a number of definitions for attitudes as well as explaining that the term attitude replaced vague terms such as “instinct, custom, social force, and sentiment” (p. 152). They cite Krech, Crutchfield & Ballachey (1962, p. 177) as defining an attitude as “[a]n enduring system of positive or negative evaluations, emotional feelings, and pro or con action tendencies with respect to a social object” (Severin & Tankard, p. 152).

Greenwald and Bamaji (1995) define Krech et al.’s idea of “social objects” in writing that “[a]ttitudes are favorable or unfavorable dispositions toward social objects, such as people, places, and policies” (pg. 7). Attitudes play an important role in media effects research because of their link to behavior. In situations when they have been strongly activated, attitudes can provide a predictive model for how an individual will act in a certain circumstance (Greenwald & Bamaji, 1995). Generally, it is believed that attitudes that the individual are strongly conscious of — explicit attitudes — can be predictive of behavior. However, Greenwald & Bamaji assert that “attitudes of which the actor is *not* conscious at the moment of action (implicit attitudes) are also strong predictive of behavior” (1995, pg. 7). Greenwald & Bamaji define an implicit attitude as “introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experience that mediate favorable or unfavorable feeling, thought, or action toward social objects” (1995, pg. 8). In other words, implicit attitudes are feelings that an individual has not identified consciously.

In the communication discipline, implicit attitudes have been examined in three primary ways: 1) advertising (i.e. Dempsey & Mitchell, 2010; Perkins & Forehand, 2012), 2) prejudice in

regards to political candidates (i.e. Nevid & McClelland, 2010; Schmidt & Nosek, 2010), and 3) attitudes cultivated by the media (i.e. Bissell & Hays, 2011; Northrup, 2010). Northrup (2010) showed that overall media use did not affect explicit or implicit racial attitudes, but that heavy news viewers demonstrated more negative implicit attitudes toward African Americans than the overall population. Bissell & Hays (2011), meanwhile, examined implicit attitudes of grade school children who were exposed to obese images. They found that an implicit “fat bias” existed when the children in their sample were exposed to images of an overweight child and that the bias decreased as self-reported television exposure increased. Nevid & McClelland (2010) used an implicit association test and images of President Barack Obama to demonstrate significant differences between the implicit racial attitudes of conservative and liberal students. They concluded that other individual biases must be considered when trying to measure implicit attitudes in communication research (Nevid & McClelland, 2010).

Measuring attitudes, especially implicit attitudes, can be tricky because the individual being measured is not always aware of their attitudes. Therefore, handing them a questionnaire as a tool to establish their attitudes is not always exact (Fazio & Olson, 2003). Researchers have found inconsistent correlations between implicit and explicit attitudes. Measures of implicit attitudes and self-reported attitudes have shown a link when confronted with “socially noncontroversial objects” (Fazio & Olson, 2003). However, that is not the case in all attitude studies, and the link between implicit and explicit attitudes with regards to more controversial attitudes and primed attitudes is ambiguous (Fazio & Olson, 2003).

Implicit attitudes and stereotype activation are closely related concepts. Devine (1989) writes that “although one may have knowledge of a stereotype, his or her personal beliefs may or may not be congruent with the stereotype.” In conducting three separate studies, she found that

automatically-activated stereotypes do not always match up with the attitudes and beliefs an individual reports having (Devine, 1989). Greenwald and Bamaji (1995) termed the findings of Devine's study to describe "implicit racism."

There are a number of ways to measure implicit attitudes, but for the purpose of this study, the most important of those is the Implicit Attitude Test (IAT). The IAT determines the association between a target variable and an attribute dimension by measuring the reaction time of the individual taking the test. Users sort using keys on a computer into categories that serve as a dual meaning (Fazio & Olson, 2003). For example, Greenwald et al. (1998) asked participants to categorize names as either black or white, and then they were asked to categorize words that were either pleasant or unpleasant. Finally, they were forced to categorize both at the same time, with each key doubling as (for example) "black/unpleasant" and "white/pleasant." "IAT preferences for white over black have been found to be stronger for white than for black respondents" (Fazio & Olson, 2003). For the purposes of this thesis, an IAT will be used to measure implicit attitudes.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **HYPOTHESES & RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the attitudes of individuals who are exposed to either complex and flat presentations of African Americans on television. Flat characters are defined as characters that conform to stereotypes, while complex characters will be both stereotypical and counter-stereotypical in their portrayal, thus forcing audience members to go beyond their schemas to understand their actions. As such, I propose two hypotheses based on the previous literature:

H1: Increased exposure to complex character portrayals will have an increased effect on positive attitudes than a single exposure.

H2: Increased exposure to complex character portrayals will have a decreased effect on negative attitudes than a single exposure.

I also present two research questions that I would like to answer in this study:

RQ1: How does exposure to complex African American characters versus flat African American characters affect the explicit attitudes of participants?

RQ2: How does exposure to complex African American characters versus flat African American characters affect the implicit attitudes of participants?

## CHAPTER 4 METHOD

### Study Design

This thesis intended to define the relationship between the complexity of a television character and the resulting attitudes of viewers of that character. In order to address the proposed hypotheses and research questions, this study takes an experimental approach. It uses a 2x2 between-subjects experimental design. Participants were exposed to one of four treatments in order to measure differences in attitudes between their fellow participants. The experiment varied in frequency (1 day vs. 3 days) and character complexity (complex vs. flat). The HBO television show *The Wire* was selected as the stimulus material for this project, and more specifically all research will focus on the character of Stringer Bell. The complexity of his character revolves around the idea that he acts as a drug dealer most of the time, a flat portrayal of a Black character, and works on real estate deals and attends business classes at a community college, which opens up a complex view of his character. The repeated-exposure aspect of this study is based on previous research by Riddle (2010) but examines race, stereotypes and complexity rather than violence on television.

### Procedures

The stimulus material used in this experiment was made up of six clips from *The Wire*. All of the clips featured the character Stringer Bell in a prominent role. He is defined in the series as a top-level drug dealer with ambitions that extend into real estate. His desire to use the drug “game” to legitimize himself differentiates him from many of the other drug dealing characters on the show, who understand their place in the drug world of Baltimore, Maryland. The three clips were represented to participants in two ways: flat and complex. So in total, six clips are used.

Participants were divided into one of four conditions when they arrived at the research facility based on exposure frequency and character complexity. Participants who took part in the repeated-exposure condition came in on three separate days and were asked to read a paragraph about Stringer Bell and then watch a 10-15 minute clip featuring the character. Then, on the final day they were asked to complete two tasks. First, they took a computerized IAT. Then, they filled out demographic questions and answered questions from five separate scales. Two of the scales were created by Dixon and Azocar (2007), and they dealt with explicit racial attitudes: the Black Stereotypes (BS) scale, which rated how they felt about 35 African American stereotypes on a 7-point likert-type scale, and the Positive Attitudes Towards Blacks (PATB) scale, which asked participants to rate how they felt about 19 positive statements about African Americans on a 7-point likert-type scale. Participants then filled out three scales related to enjoyment and appreciation of the videos. First, they were given a 16-question scale created by Oliver, Weaver and Sargent (2000) that asked them to rate how accurately a series of adjectives described the video(s) they watched. That question is referred to in this thesis as the adjectives scale. Next, participants filled out a scale created by Bartsch and Oliver (2008) that combined enjoyment and appreciation of the videos into one 23-point scale. In the resulting data, the questions were separated into separated into different enjoyment and appreciation scales. The enjoyment scale (which is the term used to describe it in this thesis) included 7 questions, and the appreciation scale (which is the term used to describe it in this thesis) included 12 questions. Those scales were then used for post-hoc testing. So in total, participants in the three-exposure condition read three description paragraphs, watched three videos, took an IAT and filled out a questionnaire with five scales.

For participants in the single-exposure condition, they only arrived up to the research facility for one day of testing. Like the repeated-exposure subjects, they read a paragraph about Stringer Bell and watched a video. Instead of watching each of the three videos, they watched the first video in the repeated-exposure sequence. They then took the IAT and filled out the five scales on that visit. For a breakdown of the experimental conditions, see Figure 2.

		<b>Frequency</b>	
		<b>Single</b>	<b>Repeated</b>
<b>Complexity</b>	<b>Flat</b>		
	<b>Round</b>		

Figure 1. Experimental Conditions Diagrams

The experiment was conducted at the Louisiana State University Media Effects Lab (MEL). Students were required to come to the MEL, which was in a building on the LSU campus, either once or three times total depending on their frequency condition. Students in the repeated-exposure condition received extra credit at a higher amount than those in the single-exposure condition. Participants were surveyed in the final two weeks of the spring semester, and there were a number of participants who did not complete their commitment to the repeated-exposure condition. A majority of the participants completed the repeated-exposure condition completed the experiment in the final two days of the semester in order to received last-minute extra credit for their mass communication courses. Also, 20 total participants in the single-exposure condition completed the experiment in between the spring and summer semesters.

## **Participants**

The study featured a volunteer convenience sample of 99 mass communication students through the LSU Media Effects Lab subject pool, with around 22 students in each treatment. The results of each treatment were then compared to each other. In total, seven participants were subjected to the experimental conditions and resulting questioners, but all subjects who had selected that they had previous experience with *The Wire* were removed from the dataset. That left a total N of 92. From this sample, 26 were male (28.3%) and 66 were female (71.7%). The ages of participants ranged from 18-62 with a mean of 23.1 (SD = 7.60). Participants were rewarded extra credit for the completion of the study.

## **Independent Variables**

The independent variables examined in this thesis were character complexity and frequency.

Frequency was operationalized by dividing participants into either a single- or repeated-exposure condition. In the single-exposure condition participants viewed a single video and then participated in a post-test. In the repeated-exposure condition participants were required to watch three sequential videos over the course of three separate days. For the repeated-exposure condition it was not required for the participants to come on consecutive days to participate in order to minimize the possibility of non-compliance. The formation of this independent variable was based on a study by Riddle (2010) in which she exposed her participants to violent episodes of a television show over the course of one or three days.

Complexity was operationalized with two sets of video clips created around the Character of Stringer Bell. The two sets of clips were broken down into the categories of “flat” and “complex.” In the flat clips, participants watched Stringer Bell play basketball, interact with

lower-level drug dealers and make (sometimes violent) decisions for his organization. Meanwhile, the second group was exposed to the same set of clips as the flat condition, but with additions that include Stringer Bell attending community college courses or dealing in real estate among white businessmen. The difference between the clips were designed to show the character as a stereotypical African American drug dealer in one instance, and then go beyond those stereotypes with added information in the other case. The stereotypical version was termed flat because they showed Stringer Bell at a very basic level that did not require much depth for his character. The complex version, meanwhile, presented Stringer Bell in both stereotypical and counter-stereotypical situations. This was done to fit the video sets into Culpeper's (2000) dimensions of flat and round characters that divides them on: 1) simple or not, 2) whether they change, or 3) whether the character surprises the viewer.

### **Pretest**

Six total videos were created for the experiment, and to ensure successful manipulation, a pilot study was performed. A total of 57 undergraduate students participated in the pretest, with each one viewing a single video and answering a follow-up questionnaire to assess their feelings on how the character of Stringer Bell was presented on 24 different factors. Between seven and 10 participants were exposed to each condition. The data of two participants were removed from the sample because they indicated that they had previously watched *The Wire*. Before being exposed to their video, participants were instructed to read a brief paragraphs outlining the plot of each video.

The six videos were sorted into three groups of two in order to assess the differences between them. One video in each group was the “flat” version of the video containing the wholly stereotypical portrayal, while the second video in each group was the “complex” version

containing the footage in its paired flat video and additional scenes to build a more complex characterization. So for example one pair might look like this: a flat video that featured a representation of Stringer Bell presenting him as a one-dimensional drug lord character, and a complex video that was nearly identical to the flat video but added extra information, such as Stringer Bell’s attendance in community college courses that were intended to create a more multi-dimensional and complex characterization. Following exposure to the video, participants ranked each of the factors based on a 5-point likert-type scale, including whether Stringer Bell was “stereotypical,” “complicated” or “easy to understand.” Significant results were found for a number of factors across all three pairs of the videos tested.

A series of factorial ANOVAs were performed in order to demonstrate that the videos did not significantly differ from each other on a number of the factors that were identified as important to the purpose of this study. Those factors were: “one-dimensional,” “multi-dimensional,” “stereotypical,” “crime,” “drugs,” and “goals.” The ANOVAs compare all of the videos to one another, thereby determining that as a package they all work together. In total, there were not significant findings between the identified factors. All factors were insignificant, with only long-term goals approaching significance in any of the ANOVAs ( $p = .08$  between Videos Sets 1 and 2, and  $p = .06$  between Video Sets 1 and 3). The results of the ANOVAs for all factors can be found in Table 1

Table 1. Pretest ANOVA Significance Results

		One-Dimensional	Multi-Dimensional	Stereotypical	Crime	Drugs	Goals
Video Set 1	Video Set 2	.733	.859	.223	.746	.223	.081
	Video Set 3	.268	.887	.401	.868	.540	.057
Video Set 2	Video Set 1	.733	.859	.223	.746	.223	.081

	Video Set 3	.421	.977	.717	.622	.545	.844
Video Set 3	Video Set 1	.268	.887	.401	.868	.540	.057
	Video Set 2	.421	.977	.717	.622	.545	.844

*Note.* The numbers listed under each factor are the significance level between each of the set of videos paired up in the two columns to the left.

Each pair was examined using an independent samples t-test to analyze the differences between the means of each factor. The first pair, which tested the flat and complex versions of video one, found statistically significant results in the “stereotypical” label ( $t = -3.59, p < .01$ ), with the flat video rating as more stereotypical than the complex video (flat:  $M = 2.22, SD = .83$ ; complex:  $M = 3.70, SD = .95$ ). However, Stringer Bell was found to be neither more “complicated” ( $t = -.232, p = .82$ ) nor “easy to understand” ( $t = 1.44, p = .17$ ) in either video. Also, the flat video found that viewers thought Stringer Bell was more defined by “greed,” “crime,” “violence,” and “drugs,” while the complex version found him defined more by “long-term goals” (see Table 2 for full statistics for these categories). Participants also found the flat version of Stringer Bell to be significantly more characterized as “bad” and “dangerous.”

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Video Set 1

Factors	Flat	Complex
Greed	2.00 <sub>A</sub> (1.12)	3.20 <sub>B</sub> (1.14)
Crime	1.44 <sub>A</sub> (.53)	2.40 <sub>B</sub> (.97)
Violence	2.11 <sub>A</sub> (.93)	3.50 <sub>B</sub> (.85)
Drugs	1.22 <sub>A</sub> (.67)	2.20 <sub>B</sub> (1.03)
Goals	2.67 <sub>A</sub> (1.32)	1.50 <sub>B</sub> (.53)
Dangerous	1.33 <sub>A</sub> (.50)	2.00 <sub>B</sub> (.47)
Bad	2.22 <sub>A</sub> (.83)	3.10 <sub>B</sub> (.74)
Complicated	2.89 <sub>A</sub> (.93)	2.20 <sub>A</sub> (1.14)
One-Dimensional	3.89 <sub>A</sub> (.78)	4.10 <sub>A</sub> (.74)
Multi-Dimensional	2.22 <sub>A</sub> (.67)	1.80 <sub>A</sub> (.63)

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within rows, means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ .

In the second pair of videos, there were no significant results on the “stereotypical” ( $t = -1.13, p = .27$ ), “easy to understand” ( $t = .943, p = .36$ ) or “complicated” ( $t = 1.40, p = .18$ ) factors, though there was a difference between the “one-dimensional” ( $t = -3.21, p < .01$ ) and “multi-dimensional” ( $t = 3.38, p < .01$ ) factors. Participants rated Stringer Bell’s characterization in the flat video as more one-dimensional (flat:  $M = 3.30, SD = .82$ ; complex:  $M = 4.50, SD = .85$ ) than the complex video, and conversely, they rated his characterization in the complex video as more multi-dimensional (flat:  $M = 2.80, SD = 1.32$ ; complex:  $M = 1.30, SD = .48$ ). Similarly significant results were found for “dangerous” ( $t = -2.77, p < .05$ ), “bad” ( $t = -2.53, p < .05$ ) and “long-term goals” ( $t = 2.72, p < .05$ ) factors, as in the first set of videos. See Table 3 for all descriptive statistics.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Video Set 2

Factors	Flat	Complex
Greed	2.30 <sub>A</sub> (1.34)	3.10 <sub>A</sub> (1.45)
Crime	1.90 <sub>A</sub> (1.20)	2.20 <sub>A</sub> (1.14)
Violence	2.20 <sub>A</sub> (1.40)	2.70 <sub>A</sub> (1.49)
Drugs	2.10 <sub>A</sub> (1.29)	2.00 <sub>A</sub> (1.15)
Goals	3.40 <sub>A</sub> (1.35)	1.90 <sub>B</sub> (1.10)
Dangerous	1.70 <sub>A</sub> (.48)	2.30 <sub>B</sub> (.48)
Bad	1.90 <sub>A</sub> (.57)	2.70 <sub>B</sub> (.82)
Stereotypical	2.30 <sub>A</sub> (.95)	2.80 <sub>A</sub> (1.03)
Easy to Understand	3.60 <sub>A</sub> (1.07)	3.10 <sub>A</sub> (1.29)
Complicated	2.40 <sub>A</sub> (.97)	1.78 <sub>A</sub> (.97)
One-Dimensional	3.30 <sub>A</sub> (.82)	4.50 <sub>B</sub> (.85)
Multi-Dimensional	2.80 <sub>A</sub> (1.32)	1.30 <sub>B</sub> (.48)

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within rows, means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ .

The third pair of videos caused problems that would require them to be re-crafted and pretested a second time. Overall, there was very little significant difference between any of the factors participants rated. Participants rated “long-term goals” ( $t = 2.48, p < .05$ ) as defining

Stringer Bell more in the complex version compared to the flat one (flat:  $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ; complex:  $M = 1.43$ ,  $SD = .54$ ). However, the final videos unexpectedly found the “one-dimensional” ( $t = 1.14$ ,  $p = .75$ ) and “multi-dimensional” ( $t = -.24$ ,  $p = .82$ ) factors going in the opposite direction than other two pairs of videos. Though the trends were not statistically significant, they indicated that the complex video was a more “one-dimensional” portrayal (flat:  $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ; complex:  $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ), while the flat video was more “multi-dimensional” ( $M = 2.11$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ; complex:  $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ). In both cases, that is the opposite of what the stimulus was trying to capture.

Participants were also asked to provide their own description of Stringer Bell at the end of the questionnaire. The responses varied and helped to illuminate what needed to be changed about the videos.

In order to correct for the unexpected results between the third set of videos, edits were made and retested in order to create a stronger stimulus. While no significant results were found in the t-tests between the third video set, the differences between them went in the right direction, with the flat video being more stereotypical and “one-dimensional” ( $t = -.830$ ,  $p = .42$ ) and the complex video marked as more “multi-dimensional” ( $t = 1.371$ ,  $p = .19$ ). See Table 4 for these descriptive statistics.

As a result of the successful ANOVA and non-significant differences between the t-tests the three video sets were considered ready for testing.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Video Set 3

Factors	Flat	Complex
One-Dimensional	3.44 <sub>A</sub> (1.24)	3.88 <sub>A</sub> (.84)
Multi-Dimensional	2.33 <sub>A</sub> (1.0)	1.75 <sub>A</sub> (.71)

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within rows, means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ .

## **Dependent Variables**

The dependent variables examined in this thesis were the valence of the implicit and explicit racial attitude of participants.

Implicit attitudes were conceptualized through an implicit association test (IAT). The IAT was presented on a computer and asked participants to sort pleasant and unpleasant words (Greenwald et al., 1998). The test then required participants to sort black and white faces by race before being asked to sort the words and faces at the same time with one side asking for “European American /Good” and the other side asking for “African American/Bad.” In the final block of the IAT, the pairings were switched, with participants then asked to sort the words and faces into one side labeled “African American/Good” and the other labeled “European American/Bad.” The results show a factor of a participant’s negative and positive associations of Blacks depending on the latency and correctness of their responses (Fazio & Olson, 2003).

Explicit attitudes were operationalized with an explicit attitude questionnaire that used two separate scales mentioned earlier in this chapter. The scales used were created by Dixon and Azocar (2007). The questionnaire asked participants to rate on a likert scale (1-7): how much they endorse a number of African American stereotypes and their attitudes towards blacks (Dixon & Azocar, 2007). The two scales were intended to gauge the participants’ outward attitudes toward African American stereotypes and the positivity with which they view African Americans.

The BS scale, which featured 35 questions, had a reliability score of  $\alpha=.725$  while the PATB scale, which featured 19 questions, had a reliability score of  $\alpha=.932$ .

## CHAPTER 5 RESULTS

This study attempted to identify if the complexity of a television character played a role in affecting the racial attitudes of viewers who watched the character. Previous work into similar areas of research, including examining the difference between stereotypic and counter-stereotypic portrayals, has found that there were attitude changes from different portrayals of race. This study attempted to build on that research by adding a repeated exposure variable to see if viewing videos of a complex media character in conditions based on single and repeated exposures made a difference in racial attitude outcomes. For the purposes of this thesis, exposure level was broken down into two categories: participants who watched one video and participants who watched three videos on three separate days. There were two hypotheses and two research questions posed in this thesis and for the purposes of this section, each one will be examined individually.

The first hypothesis stated that increased exposure to a complex character portrayal will have an increased effect on positive attitudes than a single exposure to the same portrayal. For the purposes of evaluating this hypothesis, the results of the Positive Attitudes Towards Blacks (PATB) scale mentioned in chapter 3 were examined. A factorial ANOVA was run in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 20 with the PATB scale set as the dependent variable and exposure and complexity as the two independent variables. The results of the ANOVA across all levels of exposure for the PATB scale indicated no significant difference ( $F(1, 87) 2.273, p > .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .025$ ). The complex character portrayal affected positive racial attitudes equally in the single exposure ( $M = 5.37, SE = .88$ ) as it did in the repeated exposure ( $M = 5.22, SE = .88$ ). The ANOVA also demonstrated that the PATB scale featured no

significant interaction between the exposure and complexity variables ( $F(1,87) = .593, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .007$ ). H1 was rejected. The results of the ANOVA are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. ANOVA and Descriptive Statistics for Positive Attitude Towards Blacks Scale

Character Portrayal	Single	Repeated
Flat	5.58 <sub>Aa</sub> (1.04)	5.12 <sub>Aa</sub> (1.07)
Complex	5.37 <sub>Aa</sub> (.88)	5.22 <sub>Aa</sub> (.84)

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within rows, means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$  using Holm's sequential bonferroni post hoc comparisons. Within columns, means with no lower case subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ . For exposure:  $F(1,87) = 2.273, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .025$ . For complexity:  $F(1,87) = .090, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ . For exposure\*complexity:  $F(1,87) = .593, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .007$ .

The second hypothesis stated that increased exposure to complex character portrayals will have a decreased effect on negative attitudes than a single exposure. For the purposes of evaluating this hypothesis, the results of the Black Stereotype (BS) scale mentioned in chapter 3 were examined. As with the previous hypothesis, a factorial ANOVA was run. The BS scale was the dependent variable, with exposure and complexity as the two independent variables in the analysis. The main effect for exposure with regards to the BS scale was not significant,  $F(1,88) = 1.18, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .013$ . When viewing the complex condition, participants held the same attitudes in the single-exposure condition ( $M = 4.17, SE = .43$ ) as they did in the repeated-exposure condition ( $M = 4.32, SE = .47$ ). There was also no significant variance in the interaction between the two independent variables,  $F(1,88) = .068, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ . H2 was rejected. Full results of the ANOVA can be found in Table 6.

Table 6. ANOVA and Descriptive Statistics for Black Stereotypes Scale

Character Portrayal	Single	Repeated
Flat	4.12 <sub>Aa</sub> (.57)	4.21 <sub>Aa</sub> (.59)
Complex	4.17 <sub>Aa</sub> (.43)	4.32 <sub>Aa</sub> (.47)

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within rows, means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$  using Holm's sequential bonferroni post hoc comparisons. Within columns, means with no lower case subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ . For exposure:  $F(1,88) = 1.18, p = .28$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .013$ . For complexity:  $F(1,88) = .090, df = 1, p = .76$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ . For exposure\*complexity:  $F(1,88) = .068, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ .

The first research question asked how exposure to a complex African American character versus a flat African American character would affect the explicit attitudes of participants. To answer this question, results of both the PATB scale and BS scale were used. The complexity main effects from the previous two analyses were used to answer this research question. For the BS scale, no significant main effect was found for complexity,  $F(1,88) = .527, p > .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .006$ , and as mentioned previously there was no significant interaction between the complexity and exposure variables,  $F(1,88) = .068, p > .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$ . In the single-exposure condition, there was found to be no difference between the flat ( $M = 4.12, SE = .57$ ) and complex ( $M = 4.17, SE = .43$ ) portrayals of the character, and the same result was seen in repeated-exposure condition between the flat ( $M = 4.21, SE = .59$ ) and complex ( $M = 4.32, SE = .47$ ) treatments. The PATB scale also demonstrated no main effect on the complexity variable,  $F(1,87) = .090, p > .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$ , as well as no interaction effect between complexity and exposure,  $F(1,87) = .593, p > .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .007$ . There was no significant difference in the single-exposure condition between the flat ( $M = 5.58, SE = 1.04$ ) and complex ( $M = 5.37, SE = .88$ ) portrayals, and the same was found in the repeated-exposure condition between the flat ( $M = 5.12, SE = 1.07$ ) and complex ( $M = 5.22, SE = .84$ ) portrayals. Overall, character complexity had no significant impact on the explicit attitudes of viewers.

The second research question asked how exposure to a complex African American character versus a flat African American character would affect the implicit attitudes of participants. As discussed in chapter 3, an Implicit Association Test (IAT) was used in this study to gauge implicit attitudes. Participants were required to take the IAT immediately following their viewing of the videos but prior to filling out the explicit scales. The corresponding data was then compiled into SPSS and the response time and the validity of responses were combined

together in a single measure of implicit attitudes using the two “test blocks” (which required participants to sort both words and faces). The data was recoded to take into account extended response times and incorrect answers. The first test block asked participants to sort good words and White faces to one side and bad words and Black faces to another, while the second test block switched and asked participants to sort good words and Black faces to one side and bad words and White faces to the other. As a result, the measure being used is the difference between the reaction scores for both blocks. The scoring was done using a setup proposed by Greenwald, Banaji and Nosek (2003) that took the difference between the reaction time of participants between the two testing blocks. It was one of five methods examined in their study. The main effect of complexity for the IAT score was not found to be significant,  $F(1,80) = 3.09, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .037$ , and the same was true of the interaction between complexity and exposure,  $F(1,80) = .184, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .002$ . There was no demonstrated difference between the difference between the reaction scores of participants in the flat conditions (single exposure:  $M = .297, SE = .76$ ; repeated exposure:  $M = .119, SE = .91$ ) or the complex conditions (single exposure:  $M = -.098, SE = .85$ ; repeated-exposure:  $M = -.120, SE = .67$ ). Data from the IAT scores can be found in Table 7.

Table 7. ANOVA and Descriptive Statistics for IAT

Character Portrayal	Single	Repeated
Flat	.297 <sub>Aa</sub> (.76)	.119 <sub>Aa</sub> (.91)
Complex	-.098 <sub>Aa</sub> (.85)	-.120 <sub>Aa</sub> (.67)

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within rows, means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$  using Holm’s sequential bonferroni post hoc comparisons. Exposure:  $F(1,80) = 2.21, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .027$ , complexity:  $F(1,80) = 3.09, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .037$ , exposure\*complexity:  $F(1,80) = .307, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .004$ .

A series of power analyses revealed that the null results found could have potentially been countered with much higher sample sizes for the experimental conditions, specifically in

regards to the IAT data results. Given the effects sizes and alpha levels of the IAT data, the complexity variable, with a partial  $\eta^2$  of .037, could have been pushed to a statistically significant level with 85 participants in each of the conditions, and the exposure variable would have seen a significant difference with 117 participants in each condition. Those would have represented a much higher number of participants that could have helped to tease out the results found in this thesis with regards to implicit attitudes. As a result, allowing a longer amount of time to perform the experiment, and thus collect a much bigger sample, could have helped create a better understanding of the character complexity variable with regards to implicit attitudes.

In addition to the hypotheses and research questions posed in chapter three of this thesis, a few additional factors were examined. In addition to the race scales, participants were also asked to gauge their enjoyment and appreciation of the videos with three separate scales. Three separate factorial ANOVAs were run for each scale as the dependent variable and exposure and complexity as the independent variables. The ANOVA for the appreciation scale, which gauged participants' appreciation of the videos on a 12-question scale, found no significant main effects for exposure,  $F(1,87) = .006$ ,  $p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .00$ , complexity,  $F(1,87) = .486$ ,  $p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .006$ , or the interaction between the two variables,  $F(1,87) = 1.97$ ,  $p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ . The data for the appreciation scale can be viewed in Table 8.

Table 8. ANOVA and Descriptive Statistics for Appreciation Scale

Character Portrayal	Single	Repeated
Flat	4.03 <sub>Aa</sub> (1.14)	3.65 <sub>Aa</sub> (1.35)
Complex	3.83 <sub>Aa</sub> (1.36)	4.25 <sub>Aa</sub> (1.53)

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within rows, means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$  using Holm's sequential bonferroni post hoc comparisons. Within columns, means with no lower case subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ . For exposure:  $F(1,87) = .006$ ,  $p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .00$ . For complexity:  $F(1,87) = .486$ ,  $p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .006$ . For exposure\*complexity:  $F(1,87) = 1.97$ ,  $p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .002$ .

The ANOVA of the two scales that measured enjoyment, on the other hand, found a pair of significant results. The enjoyment scale (as described in chapter 3) demonstrated no main effects for exposure ( $F(1,87) = .729, p > .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .008$ ) or complexity ( $F(1,87) = .519, p > .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .005$ ), but the interaction between the two variables was significant ( $F(1,87) = 4.033, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .044$ ). A resulting pairwise comparison showed a difference when participants viewed the complex videos at a single exposure ( $M = 3.87, SD = 1.24$ ) versus repeated exposures ( $M = 4.68, SD = 1.40$ ). The repeated exposure group had a higher level of enjoyment over the single exposure group. The adjectives scale (mentioned in chapter 3) also found no main effects for the exposure ( $F(1,87) = .497, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .006$ ) and complexity ( $F(1,87) = .730, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .008$ ) variables, but demonstrated the same significant interaction as the previous scale did between the exposure and complexity ( $F(1,87) = 6.34, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .068$ ). A pairwise comparison showed that participants who viewed the complex videos in the repeated exposure condition ( $M = 4.57, SD = .89$ ), on average, rated the videos as more enjoyable than did those in the single exposure condition ( $M = 4.03, SD = .75$ ). ANOVA data for both the enjoyment and adjective scales can be seen in seen in Table 9 and Table 10, respectively, while Figure 1 demonstrates how the relationship between the exposure variable in regards to the two scales.

Table 9. ANOVA and Descriptive Statistics for Enjoyment Scale

Character Portrayal	Single	Repeated
Flat	4.24 <sub>Ab</sub> (.97)	3.93 <sub>Ab</sub> (1.57)
Complex	3.87 <sub>Ab</sub> (1.24)	4.68 <sub>Bb</sub> (1.40)

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within rows, means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$  using Holm's sequential bonferroni post hoc comparisons. Within columns, means with no lower case subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ . For exposure:  $F(1,87) = .729, p > .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .008$ . For complexity:  $F(1,87) = .519, p > .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .005$ . For exposure\*complexity:  $F(1,87) = 6.34, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .068$ .

Table 10. ANOVA and Descriptive Statistics for Adjectives Scale

Character Portrayal	Single	Repeated
Flat	4.31 <sub>Ab</sub> (.59)	4.00 <sub>Ab</sub> (.90)
Complex	4.03 <sub>Ab</sub> (.75)	4.57 <sub>Bb</sub> (.89)

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within rows, means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$  using Holm's sequential bonferroni post hoc comparisons. Within columns, means with no lower case subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ . For exposure:  $F(1,87) = .497, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .006$ . For complexity:  $F(1,87) = .730, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .008$ . For exposure\*complexity:  $F(1,87) = 4.033, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .044$ .

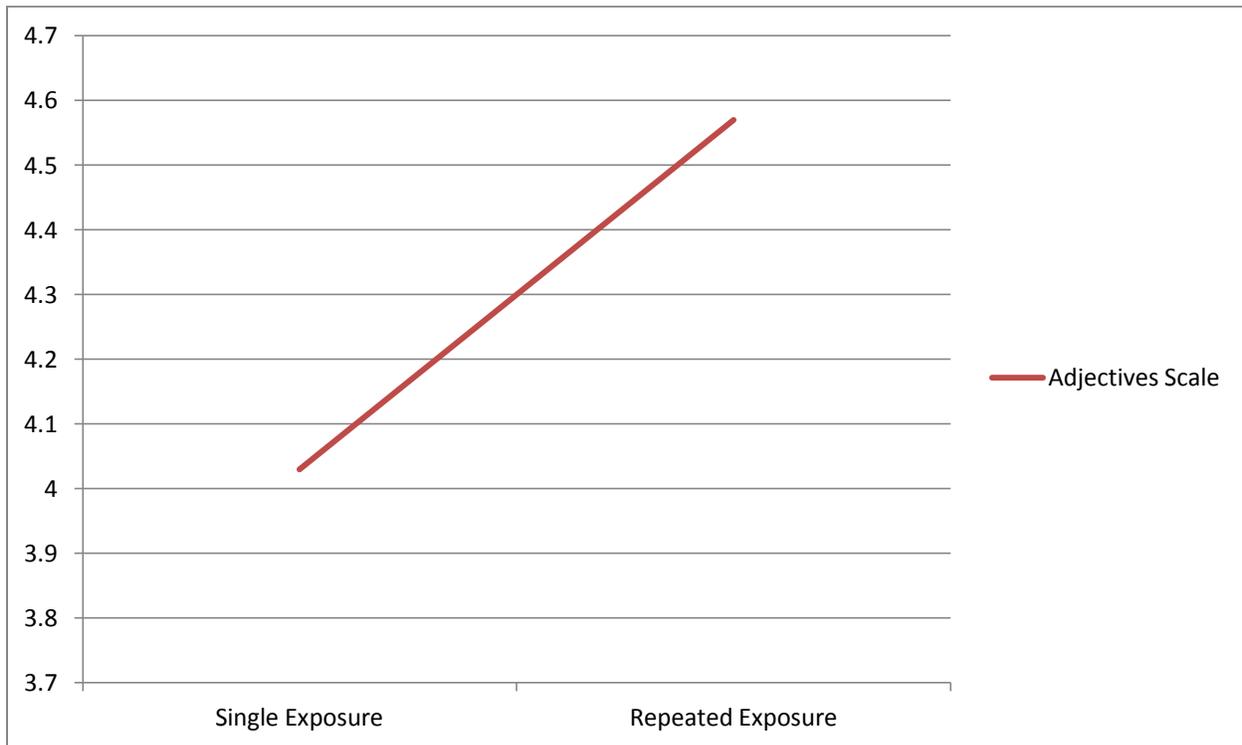


Figure 2. Adjectives Scale in Relation to Exposure.

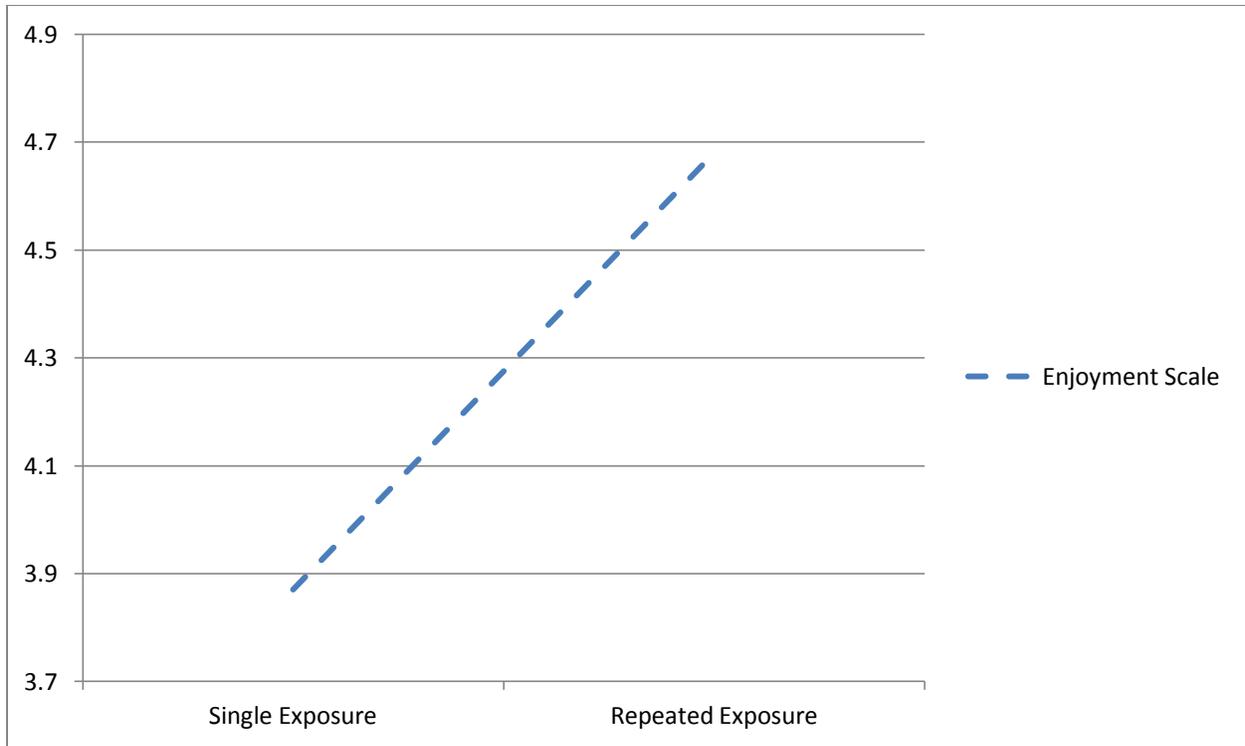


Figure 3. Enjoyment Scale in Relation to Exposure.

## CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION

This thesis intended to examine the relationship between complex character portrayals and racial attitudes of viewers. Based on research that found counter-stereotypical portrayals of African Americans had a positive effect on racial attitudes (i.e. Gilens, 1999; Valentino, 1999), this thesis attempted to take those findings a step further by integrating stereotypes and counter-stereotypes together in the same stimulus material. This thesis exposed participants to portrayals of African Americans that did not just fall into the category of stereotypical or counter-stereotypical, but rather, weaved those stereotypes and counter-stereotypes together to create a more complex and deep version of a character arc than had been previously studied. Though the findings were mostly non-significant statistically, this thesis has implications that can help us further understand literature on stereotypes, narratives and entertainment media.

### **Implications**

Character complexity, as examined in this thesis, was a fairly untested concept. The variable itself was built around a few different concepts, specifically Gillen's (1999) and Valentino et al.'s (2002) work into presence of counter-stereotypical cues and the affect they have on racial attitudes. By building counter-stereotypes on top of stereotypes and measuring the attitudes of viewers exposed to both, this thesis found that racial attitudes stayed basically the same on average. As a result, the implications of this research exists more in the potential to further flesh out this concept than in the presence of actual results that could make a case for its existence.

Important to understanding what was found in this study is the practice of trying to figure out why there were no significant results. The first place to look for that understanding is with the research revolving around counter-stereotypical cues. Valentino (1999) demonstrated that the

presence of counter-stereotypical cues worked to lessen the racial priming effect of viewers. In his study, he made participants watch one of three separate campaign ads for then-Presidential candidate George W. Bush. The narration use in each advertisement was the same; the only difference was the presence of black or white individuals in the images. In this study, the presence of counter-stereotypes, in the form of the complex treatments, did not suppress the racial priming effect at all in either the explicit scales or the Implicit Association Test reaction time data. Valentino concluded that the presence of counter-stereotypes altered the racial attitudes of his participants, but in this study, the presence of racial attitudes did not have the same results. In other words, this study suggests that the existence of counter-stereotypes in media do not cancel out the existence of stereotypes. By exposing participants to both stereotypes and counter-stereotypes, the videos used in this study may have negated any possible positive attitude gains by the counter-stereotypes. This suggests that character complexity does not have a real impact on viewers when it comes to racial attitudes. Once they are exposed to the initial stereotypes, they cannot, or it may be more difficult to, shake those stereotypes based on the new information received by the complex aspects of the characters that might deviate from those stereotypes.

The results of this study can also further the understanding of the mental models approach to priming. Mental models are supposed to be dynamic representations of events and how we understand the world around us (Roskos-Ewoldsen, et al., 2009). Character complexity should be able to fit neatly into the mental models world, as it requires an update to previously held conceptions. Mental models are supposed to be changed and manipulated by people once the priming effect has activated them (Williams, Hollan, & Stevens, 1983). However, the results of this study point more toward the “associative pathways” understanding of priming effects. In

the “associative pathways” approach, researchers understand priming as a mechanism in which viewing a stimulus activates other, related concepts in the viewer’s mind that would otherwise lay dormant (Collins & Loftus, 1975). The lack of findings in this study could point toward the idea that the stereotypes the viewer is exposed to first in the videos are activating their racial attitudes. In both single exposure conditions in this study, the trends point to the increased complexity of the character actually leading to an increase in negative racial attitudes and decrease in positive racial attitudes. Though not statistically significant, further research could delve into whether this trend continues in other situations, and if they do those results would be alarming. Rather than being dynamic and changeable, the attitudes experienced by the participants are simply made more salient initially, and the presence of counter-stereotypes later during the viewing experience do nothing to change the attitudes that have already been activated by viewers. However, further testing of this concept is required to have a better understanding of how this mechanism works.

As two pieces of the mental models puzzle, narrative engagement and the presence of exemplars may have played a role in the outcome of this study. Shrum (2009) wrote that vivid examples (or exemplars) play a larger role in subsequent judgments than more subtle examples. This study was built around subtle manipulations and small effects, but the success of the manipulation in the pretest suggests that something was throwing viewers off about what they were watching. Because the media uses exemplars to communicate most of its messages (Zillmann and Brosius, 2000), clearly defined exemplars are important to the process of changing attitudes. It seems possible that showing Stringer Bell playing basketball or counting money made from drugs could have had a more vivid impact on participants than expecting them to understand how taking business classes at a local community college or meeting with real

estate developers differentiates him from the other criminals and drug dealers in the videos. Perhaps the presence of crime and drugs makes a bigger impact on viewers than the other aspects of Stringer Bell's character arc when judging racial attitudes. Though the pretest suggested that when thinking specifically about the character himself, participants could differentiate his actions between videos, the racial attitudes measures might show that the more vivid stereotypical cues are holding more sway over their judgments.

Lack of narrative engagement may have played a role in lack of differences between measured attitudes. In order for viewers to shift beliefs, they need to be engaged with the medium they are consuming (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). In chapter 1, this thesis identified perceived realism and identification as the two most important concepts from Busselle and Bilandzic's (2008) model of narrative engagement for this study. Both are essential to shifting beliefs. If a viewer is taken out of the narrative by events that they perceived to be unrealistic, they will be less engaged (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Meanwhile, where identification is concerned, the viewer needs to take on the emotions and goals of the character in order clearly engage and identify with a character (Oatley, 1994). As the results of this study indicate a lack of change in attitudes and beliefs, it seems reasonable to suppose that the videos failed to engage the participants at an appropriate level. This study did not measure engagement, and in retrospect that perhaps was a failing in the design. However, the two enjoyment scales may point to a further understanding of this phenomenon. As discussed in chapter 5, the adjectives scale and the enjoyment scale both had a significant interaction between the exposure and complexity variables. As exposure increased, enjoyment levels of the videos also increased. That finding combined with the faster reaction times might suggest that increased exposure was affecting how they felt about the videos. Busselle and Bilandzic (2006) demonstrated that engagement factors,

specifically transportation and identification, strongly predicted enjoyment of a film. Perhaps further exploration of the exposure variable in conjunction with character complexity could help determine a potential relationship between engagement and subsequent attitudes.

While this study lacks significant findings, it could act as a guide to further explore the concept of character complexity. The findings ultimately suggest exploring the complexity variable in association with repeated exposures, narrative engagement and enjoyment. Racial attitudes did not change in this experiment, but that does not mean character complexity does not affect other attributes of our media consuming experience.

The results of this study deepen our understanding of stereotypes in the media by showing that stereotypes and counter-stereotypes play very distinct roles. On their own, counter-stereotypes have been shown to be powerful forces of attitude change (Valentino, 1999), but combine them together with stereotypes in the same package and their effects fall short. The results of this study suggest that how researchers study stereotypes in the future needs to expand. When stereotypes are activated in our minds, those stereotypes persist with us and affect our later judgments (Dixon, 2006). Valentino et al. (2002) concluded that presenting individuals in a manner differing from the expected norm, people will make process them at a more conscious level, skipping the automatic cues that traditional stereotypes provide. This study built on that idea by demonstrating that exposure to stereotypes before the counter-stereotypes was inhibiting the conscious processing of the counter-stereotypes. The next step is figure out how counter-stereotypes and stereotypes work in conjunction with one another, and whether those interactions can inhibit or change the way that activation works.

The work done in this thesis suggests that character complexity, in the way it was measured here, is not leading to a significant change in the way of attitudes by television

viewers. The mental models framework is not sufficient to explain shifts in attitudes in regards to character complexity. While mental models allow individuals to explore and experience their world in a more complex fashion, the activation of previously held stereotypes are creating a wall that participants were not able to overcome. The deep portrayal of Stringer Bell as a complicated man who wears the hats of a violent drug dealer, community college student and aspiring real estate developer isn't allowing people to leave their biases behind. Instead, it is acting to amplify them. In other words, mental models cannot become active if individuals are not in a position that pushes them to further their understanding of their world. When chronically accessible heuristics, such as stereotypes, allow them to interpret the world easily without extra thought, it would appear individuals are taking that option rather than questioning their own beliefs and searching for a deeper and complex understanding of the world.

### **Limitations**

Using an experimental framework to examine a fairly new area of study can have its setbacks, and this thesis was no exception. There were a number of limitations to this project that stood in the way of stronger results and more concrete overall findings. First, the sample used in this experiment was both small and not representative in many ways. It was a convenience sample at a southern university. Most of the participants were college students (as mentioned in the chapter 4, the mean age of participants was 23.1), and an overwhelming majority (71.7%) were female. Those factors, along with geographical considerations, form a pool of participants that is less than ideal when trying to examine if and how a type of media may affect the attitudes of the overall population.

Next, the timeframe in which this study took place had one major implication for the strength of the findings. The subject pool used was not available for the amount of time needed

to have a proper sample size for each condition. The range of participants for the sample size was 20-27. For results that featured small effects sizes, an increase in the number of participants was required to fully flesh out the answers for which this thesis was searching.

Third, the repeated-exposure condition was a major difficulty in trying to build up a sizable sample size and more consistent results. Previous studies that have used multiple exposures (i.e. Riddle, 2010) have had participants come in on a scheduled timeline. Riddle, for example, had participants view a video three times, coming into the lab on a Monday, Wednesday and Friday of the same week in order to complete the study. In this experiment, participants were asked to come in three separate times over a two week period at their convenience. That meant some participants were coming in on three consecutive days, but others were coming in with multiple days separating each exposure. In fact, in a few cases participants viewed the first two exposures the first week of the study, only to finish the third exposure on the final available date. The repeated-exposure design also resulted in non-compliance for a number of subjects who did not complete the second or third day, and were left out of the data. That non-compliance, along with the timeframe mentioned earlier, went a long way toward not having the preferred sample size available when tests were run.

Fourth, the source material used to create the stimulus had built-in limitations of its own. *The Wire* lasted only five seasons (of 10-13 episodes each), of which the character of Stringer Bell was in only three. As a complex crime drama with dozens of characters throughout its run, *The Wire* did not provide a lot of available scenes to be used in the construction of the stimulus videos. That meant the number of possible combinations for the videos were limited to the few scenes available with the character featured in them. When trying to construct very intricate videos with subtle differences between them, it meant there was very little wiggle room. Because

the presence of the repeated-exposure condition meant having to create three separate videos, the source material was stretched thin and not nearly as strong as it could have been with more available scenes or just a single all-inclusive video used.

Finally, the sequential order of the experiment itself may have caused some problems with people filling out the Black Stereotype and Positive Attitudes Towards Blacks scales. After viewing the video, participants were asked to take an implicit association test that asked them to sort good and bad words and black and white faces into different categories. By taking that test first, it could have potentially keyed participants in on the nature of the experiment. Therefore, when participants arrived at the explicit racial questions, they may have had a better understanding on what the study is looking for and tried to over-correct their responses to the questions as a form of social desirability.

### **Suggestions for Future Work**

While the results of this study showed no differences between the variables, it can still possibly serve as a starting point for further research into the area of character complexity. Though Valentino, Hutchings and White (2002) demonstrated that the presence of counter-stereotypic cues can dampen racial priming, it is important to understand how those cues combine with more traditional, stereotypical cues to form an overall picture that viewers construct in their minds. An experimental world that only provides counter-stereotypical cues rarely exists in reality, so understanding it at a deeper level is important for understanding the media we consume as a society.

The first place to start in terms of future research stemming from this study is to try and apply the concepts used in this thesis to either a different medium or to a different source from television. If a researcher had a source to work with that they could exert more control over, they

could potentially manipulate the complexity variable at a more precise level. If, say, a short story were used instead, the researcher could craft a tale down to the minute details that could satisfy the differences between flat and complex characters or stereotypical and counter-stereotypical cues. In the experimental environment, being able to exert more control over the variables is a must with any research in this realm going forward.

In Riddle's (2010) study, she suggests that future research take the exposure variable and try and replicate it at a level of 15 or 20 exposures. It would be a difficult task to accomplish, but the results of this study seem to suggest that might yield quality results. While the racial attitude scales did not produce significant results, this thesis did find a difference between the single-exposure complex condition and the repeated-exposure complex condition in terms of the two enjoyment scales that were given to participants. That suggests the repeated exposure was having an effect on what participants thought of the videos, and perhaps extending the experiment to feature more exposures could continue to change how they felt about the videos and affect their mental models more.

Exploring the concept of character complexity in more detail requires delving into a number of pre-established research arenas this thesis was not able to examine. This study looked at whether participants enjoyed the videos themselves, but future work could take that even further. Likability is a concept that has been examined repeatedly (i.e. Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2008; Biel & Bridgwater, 1990; Roskos-Ewoldsen, Bichsel & Hoffman, 2002) in advertising research; however, likability could have been used to examine character in this study as well. The advertising literature has demonstrated that the stronger an advertisement's likability, the more likely an individual is to agree with the message of the ad in question (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Bichsel & Hoffman, 2002). Further examination of character complexity could look at the

likability of the characters in question to find out whether the more complex portrayals lead to a higher degree of likability, and if so, whether that likability can predict subsequent attitude judgments. Further research in this area could even add to the current research being done Haidt's Moral Foundation Theory (MFT). Future research could apply the MFT segments to understand how an individual's perceptions of morality shape the way viewers perceive complex characters. Moral violations could play a heavy role in the liking, or disliking of a character, and that could, in turn, lead viewers into a situation in which they make judgments that go against the stimulus being viewed.

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**APPENDIX 1  
SCALES**

**Bartsch & Oliver (2008) Scale**

Rate how much you agree with the following statements.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
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- This show will stick with me for a long time.
- I know I will never forget this show.
- I'll soon put this show out of my mind.
- I don't imagine that I will remember this show for too long.
- I continue to think about this show.
- The show left me with a lasting impression.
- It was fun for me to watch this show.
- I had a good time watching this show.
- The show was entertaining.
- I enjoyed watching this show.
- This show made me feel bad.
- Shows like this one are no fun at all.
- I found this show to be very meaningful.
- There was no meaningful purpose to this show.
- I was moved by this show.
- The show was thought provoking.
- This show provoked deep feelings in me.
- I could not take this show seriously.
- The show was suspenseful.
- This show had lots of great twists and turns.
- I was at the edge of my seat while watching this show.
- This was a heart-pounding kind of show.
- This show was wonderfully unpredictable.

**Dixon & Azocar Black Stereotypes scale (2007)**

How strongly do you endorse the following statements?

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
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- African Americans are unified.
- African Americans are outgoing.
- African Americans are athletic.
- African Americans are hardworking.



- If I had the chance to introduce Black visitors to my friends and neighbors, I would be pleased to do so.
- I would rather not have Blacks in the same apartment building I live in.
- I would probably feel somewhat self-conscious dancing with a Black in a public place.
- I would not mind it at all if a Black family with about the same income and education as me moved in next door.
- I think that Black people look more similar to each other than White people do.
- Inter-racial marriage should be discouraged to avoid the "who-am-I?" confusion which the children feel.
- I get very upset when I hear a White make a prejudicial remark about Blacks.
- I favor open housing laws that allow more racial integration of neighborhoods.
- It would not bother me if my new roommate were Black.
- It is likely that Blacks will bring violence to neighborhoods when they move in.
- I enjoy a funny racial joke, even if some people might find it offensive.
- The federal government should take decisive steps to override the injustices Blacks suffer at the hands of local authorities.
- Black and White people are inherently unequal.
- Whites should support Blacks in their struggle against discrimination and segregation.
- Generally, Blacks are not as smart as Whites.
- I worry that in the next few years I may be denied my application for a job or a promotion because of preferential treatment given to minority group members.
- Racial integration (of schools, businesses, residences, etc.) has benefited both Whites and Blacks.

**Oliver, Weaver & Sargent Adjective Scale (2000)**

How much do you agree the following adjectives describe the video you watched?

Not at all				Very Much
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- Interesting
- Boring
- Entertaining
- Tedious
- Enjoyable
- Unpleasant
- Absorbing
- Involving
- Realistic
- Offensive
- Familiar
- Creative
- Humorous

- Serious
- Natural
- Witty

**APPENDIX 2  
IRB APPROVAL**

**ACTION ON PROTOCOL APPROVAL REQUEST**



Institutional Review Board  
Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair  
131 Davie Boyd Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
P: 225.578.8392  
F: 225.578.8792  
[irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu) [lsu.edu/irb](http://lsu.edu/irb)

**TO:** Meghan Sanders  
Mass Communications

**FROM:** Robert C. Mathews  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

**DATE:** February 29, 2012  
**RE:** IRB# 3235

**TITLE:** Man Without a Country: How Character Complexity Primes Racial Stereotypes

**New Protocol/Modification/Continuation:** New Protocol

**Review type:** Full  Expedited  **Review date:** 2/28/2012

**Risk Factor:** Minimal  Uncertain  Greater Than Minimal

**Approved**  **Disapproved**

**Approval Date:** 2/29/2012 **Approval Expiration Date:** 2/28/2013

**Re-review frequency:** (annual unless otherwise stated)

**Number of subjects approved:** 250

**Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal:** (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

**By:** Robert C. Mathews, Chairman \_\_\_\_\_

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –  
Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:**

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.

**SPECIAL NOTE:**

*\*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>*

## **VITA**

Ben Miller grew up in Tacoma, Washington. He earned his bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Washington in June 2006. Ben will earn a Master of Mass Communication from the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University in August 2012. In between the UW and LSU, Ben worked as the sports editor at the Tacoma Weekly before joining the Obama campaign in 2008 as a deputy field organizer. He will begin doctoral studies in Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota in fall 2012.