

Diego Leon De Jesus

Professor Knisely

OAKES 80B

12/6/2017

What It Means To Be a Part of American Culture: Values, Media, Violence, and my
Mexican Immigrant Experience

Introduction

Firstly, *America* will be referring to the United States of America. The primary concern at this time will be what is thought to be or considered modern *American* Culture. What does it mean to be a part of American Culture? To answer this question, I will provide personal insight and experience, an analysis of *values* coming from a multitude of perspectives, the role and impact of *media*, and a look at *violence* and *mass incarceration* in America to understand what it means to be *American*. I will investigate difference in values, media's near and increasing omnipresence and how it normalizes objectification of women, and increasing violence. Thus, being a part of *American* Culture means being aware of a certain kind of privilege, the difference of values of others, being aware of the role and effects of media on people, their values, and further extended effects, as well as an awareness of the violent *culture* and mass incarceration in America.

Introduction to Sources & Purpose of sources

I utilize 6 sources within this paper. These include 1 book, 2 academic journals, 1 periodical, 1 film, and a personal interview. The book used is *The New Jim Crow: Mass*

Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander. I will use *The New Jim Crow* to provide a brief history and contextualization of caste systems, their effects, and the idea of gangsta love.

Media, Racial Identity, and Mainstream American Values is an investigative journal. It looks into media and its effects on values and identity. I will utilize the academic journal to provide survey data and concepts important to media and values. The journal depicts data from a survey of 499 college students from a Southeastern state university: 62 Asian American, 222 Caucasian, and 215 African American.

Shades of American Identity: Implicit Relations between Ethnic and National Identities is also partially an investigative journal as well as an expository one. I will utilize this academic journal to provide concepts about American identity and who is considered American.

The film *Killing Us Softly 4* by Jean Kilbourne will provide examples and content on advertising of women and the effects of it. More specifically it provides countless images of women depicted in media being degraded or objectified.

The personal interview is one of my brothers. My brother Rafael Leon De Jesus answered questions regarding American values, his values, media, and other concepts that will be cited. My brother is a 17 year old junior in high school. He was born in Mexico but has lived 15 years of his life in America.

Section 1: Investigation and Analysis of American Values

In a personal interview of Rafael Leon De Jesus, my brother, I asked him questions on the topics of values, media, and happenings in America. When asked

about American values Rafael proceeded to say that they include, “tradition of lying, murder and genocide, as well as an adaptation and perversion of other cultures”. When asked why he thought so, he did not hesitate to point out the wars for our *freedom*, the snakes in politics, and the corporations out for money no matter the cost to people. All he saw growing up was antagonism against anyone not rich and white. “American Values? What values? There are none. Nothing but a facade of holidays that hide the murder of millions and lie right to our faces about so-called freedom” (Leon De Jesus). My brother certainly depicts a perspective of an American who has seen the worst America has to offer. His personal values in America include family, friendship, knowledge, hard work, well being, and a kind of invisibility for survival.

The Academic Journal *Media, Racial Identity, and Mainstream American Values* elucidates media’s involvement in the development of values. “American media emphasize materialistic values (e.g., affluence, consumption) by presenting middle-upper class people who have comfortable life styles, possess high status occupations, and have high incomes”(Fujioka and Neuendorf). All of this fancy presentation, nevermind it fails at representation. Most families are not this way. Most families have more to worry about than the brand they carry.

According to the journal, Caucasian Americans, center their values “on individualism and competition”(Fujioka and Neuendorf). African American values are found to be “oriented toward communalism and group harmony”(Fujioka and Neuendorf). There is a variety of Asian American ethnic groups but values are shared for the most part and include “high regard for the group and the family, group

harmony, respect for elders, cooperation, and personal relations”(Fujioka and Neuendorf). When compared to the Caucasian Americans, both African-American and Asian-American values are less individualistic. Granted, these values come from a particular region, but nevertheless this data elucidates what values are from three ethnic groups in America. At first glance looking at the data shown I try to consider what it is that makes these central values different. What molds values into being? I think that it is an important question when trying to understand the culture of America.

I can't help but remember the stories my mom told me about American culture vs Mexican culture. She spoke of Mexican culture being about a close knit family and the well-being of the home and American culture being majorly capitalistic. The U.S. is a country based on markets and consumerism which is evident, with the ever-growing advertisements for products in many forms. This includes materialistic products with a certain utility, or even products that represent particular status like brands, and products that are suggestive of acts and events that often have the power to normalize and standardize things. It's quite apparent that media is the current tool used as distributor and promoter in chief of products. Well, what is media?

Section 2: Role of Media in America

Media can be broadcast, print, and pretty much anything on the internet. It is any form of mass communication. With the aid of ever-growing technology it is nearing *omnipresence* and there is no escaping it or its effects. “I remember the days when wanting information about products took more work than just typing on a phone”(Leon De Jesus). My brother and I remember that watching a Tv show was like a hostage

situation. Be there in front of the TV at this time on this day and if someone else is using it, well you missed it. Media's power and attraction has increased along with its availability, and at times in a superfluous fashion. Advertisements finding their way into everything normalize this idea that all we are meant for is to purchase and consume.

Section 3: Media and Consumerism as American Culture

America is all about production and consumerism right? Several years ago only about half of youtube videos had ads. Today every video has ads and sometimes even two just to watch one video. I remember watching American Tv shows both old and new and almost all of them had some sort of product placement. Like flintstones, looney tunes, and I Love Lucy. It was always a promotion of brand clothing, food, and even standards. But that isn't all they normalize. Like with stranger things, IT, or even the 70s show. There was always the same carbon copy family with neighbors just like them and maybe even a token person of color, but that was rare. *Media, Racial Identity, and Mainstream American Values* makes it clear that there is an evident relationship between media and values. So what does Media do?

Section 4: Impact of Media on Identity

Media, Racial Identity, and Mainstream American Values provides the idea of Media Socialization, which is "the ongoing process of identity formation via interaction" with media. Its presence in our lives gives it the opportunity and power to provide us with norms, standards, and artificial desires. Fujioka and Neuendorf state that exposure to media is a factor that molds and shapes a person's identity and their values based on

what they see. There's "Black press, Asian media, and Hispanic media... but no denoted 'White' press/media." It is categorizations like this that make white, right. Anything else is in the other category. Treated like belittled unicorns in a room of horses. This person is not white and because of that everything must be done to accentuate that they aren't *normal*.

The journal *Shades of American Identity* echoes this molding and shaping of identity. Devos and Mohamed argue that "European Americans are implicitly conceived of as being more American than African, Asian, Latino, and even Native Americans" (739). They argue that American has been made to really and only mean white. For me and my brother that meant that we never truly have seen ourselves as American even though all we know is America. Why? It was because of expectations.

Media reveals America's expectations of the *others* through movies and even the wording of news. The headlines read the black/brown gangster vs. the (white) drunk golf player. I almost always saw the Latinx gangster or the person of color character only there as part of a inclusion campaign. It is constant projections like these that make people embrace violence because it's what they are *meant* for. I saw white folk get superheroes and cool characters with amazing stories. I got criminals and unwanted *illegals*. You'd hear about the white character everywhere. I had to hear about a brown immigrants like me in the news with speculation of job stealing as a child. It was that kind of media that set my values which echo my brother's value of invisibility. I value working hard in the dark with no recognition or any representation.

Section 5: Impact of Media: Dehumanization and Degradation of Women

While media may have an effect on the forming of values, it also has a more nefarious effect. Jean Kilbourne analyzes how advertisements set standards for what it means to be a beautiful, womanly, or ladylike. She argues through her film that the objectified bodies of women, over-sexualized products, and degrading advertisements of women in media set the standard. She elucidates what it means to be relegated to the kitchen or the bedroom. Many people think they can avoid media's effect but they can't. In fact, a "major publication of the advertising industry once said - Only 8% of an ad's message is received by the conscious mind. The rest is worked and reworked deep within the recesses of the brain" (Kilbourne). And so, the men who watch these advertisements all their lives, knowingly or not, are taught to objectify and degrade women.

Jean Kilbourne believes that objectification is what sparks sexual assault and rape, since women are depicted as objects of pleasure. That is the more explicit side of rape culture. I would define rape culture as a "culture" accepted through silence and promoted through media and the perception of women. It is perpetuated through a conditioned silence by men. It is a silently awkward acceptance of wrong and normal. It doesn't help that the U.S. consumerism mecca assaults people with degrading images that make it normal to dehumanize. Images and media that make it a culture to violently harass women.

Section 6: Violence and Mass Incarceration as American Culture

“Living in America means being used to violence in the news and in the neighborhood” (Leon De Jesus). It seems like every month there is a new shooting in America. A new sexual assault case or another raping that happened. There are so many new prisons when compared to several decades ago. At least that's what my parents tell me. *Violence in America* a periodical by Ted Gest and Gordon Witkin, reveals findings of the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics. In the article, Gest and Witkin lay out data that show a rise in violent crimes from 1960 to 1992 and depicts an increase of ten times the amount in 1960. Key findings include increase in killer teens, the danger of crimes against black teens higher than white males and females of either race, and a fourfold increase in the amount of guns in 1990 when compared to 1950 (Gest and Witkin). America is a warzone for many people and that is just a normal part of living in many low income neighborhoods.

Growing up in the projects and walking home with groceries one day to see a gang jumping in members. My family didn't even flinch or look at what was happening. I recall the stories of my brother in law about gang borders and how losing a friend was like a common cold. It was a seasonal regional problem, where hunting season started after five o'clock. It has never been considered an anomaly to us. It was just the way the world revolved systematically. I remember the cops saying “cuff the bald brown ones, they're probably gangsta cholos”. It was angering because I know Chicanos did more than go to prison. To me that is American culture. Just fill up the beds, the more the melanin the more Benjamins.

Alexander believes that mass incarceration in recent years is a new caste system. She thinks that “Just as Jim Crow, as a system of racial control, was dramatically different from slavery, mass incarceration is different from its predecessor” (118). Mass incarceration is implicitly race based, has effects of racial stigma, has surface absence of racial hostility, has working class white victims of the war on drugs, and black support for “get tough” policies. Clearly it is an American Monster much tougher to defeat than its predecessor Jim Crow. It is tougher because it has its teeth sunk in so deep into America that it is America. Mass incarceration is the embodiment of American culture. It is the Culture of putting money in esoteric deep pockets all for the suffering of many with only a penny.

Conclusion:

What does it mean to a part of American Culture? Well partially, it means that as an American there certainly comes the privilege of having opportunities. But it also means making a choice, about whether to be aware or blind about the monsters under the bed. It means knowing about the suffering of millions because of mass incarceration. It means knowing the damage caused because of the role certain media plays and its effects on people, their values, and further extended effects. These effects include normalization of American equaling white, objectification of women, rape and sexual assault, and admiration and acceptance of violence. Like my brother said, it’s “nothing but a facade”. America is a business.

Works Cited

- Devos, Thierry, and Hafsa Mohamed. "Shades Of American Identity: Implicit Relations Between Ethnic And National Identities." *Social And Personality Psychology Compass*, vol 8, no. 12, 2014, pp. 739-754. *Wiley-Blackwell*, doi:10.1111 / spc3.12149.
- Fujioka, Yuki, and Kimberly A. Neuendorf. "Media, Racial Identity, And Mainstream American Values." *Taylor & Francis*, 2017,
- Leon De Jesus, Rafael. Personal interview. 1 November 2017.
- Killing Us Softly 4 - Advertising's Image of Women. Directed by Sut Jhally, written by Jean Kilbourne, Cambridge Documentary Films, 2010.
- Gest, Ted and Gordon Witkin. "Violence in America. (Cover Story)." *U.S. News & World Report*, vol. 116, no. 2, 17 Jan. 1994, p. 22.
- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow : Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York : [Jackson, Tenn.] :New Press ; Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 2010. Print.