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REPRESENTING GAY MEN ON AMERICAN TELEVISION

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At the start of the 1998-99 television season, NBC made television history with the premiere of *Will & Grace*, its new situation comedy featuring prime-time television's first gay male lead character. The show pairs Will Truman (Eric McCormack), a successful gay Manhattan lawyer, and Grace Adler (Debra Messing), an interior designer, as soulmates who support each other through happy times and sadder ones, such as the process of nursing broken hearts. Nielsen ratings reveal that audience members have responded favorably to this pairing as well as to Will's gay friend, Jack, played by Sean Hayes ("Culture," 1999). What is perhaps most noteworthy about the portrayal of these two gay male characters to date, however, is the striking contrast between the two: Will remains so low-key about his sexual orientation that it has become almost inconsequential to the show, while Jack is consistently presented as the stereotypical flamboyant queen. In other words, Will and Jack are extreme opposites on the spectrum of possible media representations of gay men. Is it true, as many critics claim, that Jack is too gay and Will is not

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gay enough ("Culture," 1999)? Is it more accurate to argue, as others have, that these two characters simply represent the diversity of personality types that exist within the gay community?

♦ What Is Media Representation?

... The phenomenon of symbolic annihilation pertains to the historical nonrepresentation or underrepresentation of specific groups by the media—and/or to the trivialization of those groups when and if they infrequently appear—as a result of decisions by the powers-that-be at media outlets regarding what sorts of groups will and will not be represented in American media offerings and how they will be represented.

Clark (1969) identified four chronological stages of media representation of social groups. During the first stage, nonrecognition, the group simply does not appear at all in media offerings. Viewers from other cultures, therefore, would never know that members of that group exist in American culture if they receive all of their information about the United States through mass media channels. Once a specific group begins to be represented in media offerings, it enters the second stage: ridicule. During this stage of representation, the group is stereotyped and its members are frequently presented as being "buffoons," as were African Americans in the early television program *Amos 'n' Andy* or, more recently, with the character J. J. on *Good Times*. During the third stage of representation, regulation, members of the social group are presented as protectors of the existing social order, such as police officers and detectives. Finally, during the fourth and final stage of representation as identified by Clark—respect—members of the social group are presented in the complete range of roles, both positive and negative, that their members actually occupy in real life. Stereotypical characters may still appear

American audience members, since the codes, conventions, symbols, and visuals they have offered have contributed significantly to the social construction of gay men and to the resulting social ramifications of that construction.

Gay men remained in the nonrecognition stage of representation on American television until the late 1960s, when the nation regularly was being confronted with a host of social issues ranging from racial tensions and race riots to concerns about free love, drug abuse, and abortion. The masses received their first exposure to gay men and the gay lifestyle on national television on March 7, 1967, with the airing of the CBS *Reports* documentary "The Homosexuals" (Alwood, 1996). The goal of this documentary series was to "delve into social issues that were too controversial for most [other] programs" (Alwood, 1996, p. 69), and an installment about homosexuality promised to catch the public's attention. To represent the diversity of gay men in America, the producers arranged interviews with a variety of men, such as a sailor, a rodeo rider, a truck driver, and a female impersonator; despite this reality, during the production phase of this documentary, a prominent CBS correspondent referred to the project as the "pity a poor homosexual" show (Alwood, 1996, p. 70). Perhaps that is because some of the interview subjects were shown lying on an analyst's couch and many others were presented with their faces hidden in the leafy shadows of potted plants, as if they were filled with shame; perhaps it is because the program featured assessments from psychiatrists such as "The fact that somebody's homosexual . . . automatically rules out the possibility that he will remain happy for long," or uncomplimentary self-assessments by gay men such as "I know that inside now I'm sick—I'm not sick just sexually; I'm sick in a lot of ways" (Alwood, 1996, pp. 72-73). A final memorable aspect of the documentary was the stereotypical description of homosexuality offered by CBS correspondent Mike Wallace:

The average homosexual, if there be such, is promiscuous. He is not interested in nor capable of a lasting relationship like that of a heterosexual marriage. His sex life—his "love life"—consists of chance encounters at the clubs and bars he inhabits, and even on the streets of the city. The pickup—the one-night stand—these are characteristic of the homosexual relationship. And the homosexual prostitute has become a fixture on the downtown streets at night. (quoted in Rothenberg, 1981, p. 7)

With those words, gay men emerged from the nonrecognition stage on American television and entered Clark's (1969) second stage: ridicule. They remained primarily as objects of ridicule for several years, until the impact of the gay liberation movement increased the visibility of gay men in various social positions nationwide and produced increased levels of social tolerance. . . .

Alwood (1996) points out that NBC's *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* was the first network television show to approach the subject of gay men and their lifestyles with some regularity by creating in 1970 the stereotypically effeminate character named Bruce, who was subjected to long strings of antigay jokes; within a few years, the show was averaging one joke per program about gay men and gay liberation. . . .

Gay men entered the regulation stage of media representation, as defined by Clark (1969), in the late 1970s with the introduction of a positive gay male character on the police-precinct-based situation comedy *Barney Miller*; other positive gay characters appeared during this period in the short-lived series *The Nancy Walker Show* and the longer-running sitcom *Alice* (Alwood, 1996). By then, the gay liberation movement had revealed the range of positions gay men hold in American society, and "the term 'gay' [had been] wrenched away from the older pejorative discourse of 'homosexuality'" (Wanney, 1996, p. 18). Such positive portrayals continued into the 1980s

when NBC introduced the situation comedy *Love, Sidney*, starring Tony Randall. This series, based on a made-for-television movie about a man who had recently broken up with his male lover, almost provided American prime-time television with its first gay male lead character. The network, however, backed away from the character's homosexuality and deleted all references to it, going so far as to say that the series was not directly related to the movie. Although the character of Sidney was quite a sympathetic one, the series was soon canceled as a result of low ratings.

The positive representational strides achieved by gay men in the late 1970s and early 1980s suffered a series of setbacks in the mid- to late 1980s, as acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) emerged as a health threat in American society and became representationally linked to gay males. Early on, the condition was referred to as GRID, which stood for "gay-related immunodeficiency" and linked the disease directly with the gay male lifestyle from the earliest days of media coverage (Piontek, 1992). The term AIDS was adopted by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta in 1982, but by then the stage had already solidly been set for media representations of AIDS as "a gay plague," "the price paid for anal intercourse," "a fascist ploy to destroy homosexuals," and "a disease that turns fruits into vegetables," among similar others (Treichler, 1988, pp. 32-33). Such representations persisted even as other risk groups—including intravenous drug users and Haitians who had emigrated to the United States—were added to the list of infected individuals, along with hemophiliacs, the first "innocent victims" (Gross, 1994; Hart, 1999). Gay men who were already stigmatized as "deviant" were further stigmatized as "lethally contagious" and were represented to be a significant health threat to "innocent" individuals in the population at large (Cadwell, 1991, p. 237). . . .

In the late 1980s, several prime-time television shows—including *21 Jump*

Street, *Designing Women*, *The Equalizer*, *Houston Knights*, *Leg Work*, *Midnight Caller*, *Mr. Belvedere*, and *A Year in the Life*—represented AIDS in individual episodes, and virtually all of them served to solidify the link between gay men and AIDS either explicitly or implicitly (Netzhammer & Shamp, 1994). . . .

In the AIDS episode of *21 Jump Street*, Officer Tom Hanson (Johnny Depp) is assigned to guard a male teen with AIDS from harassment by his peers. Although the teen's father claims that his son is a hemophiliac and contracted HIV/AIDS as a result of a blood transfusion, Hanson eventually learns that the father has lied because he is ashamed of the true cause of his son's condition. Instead, the teen reveals that he is gay and that he has never had a blood transfusion nor injected drugs of any kind. This revelation, concealed until the episode's end, intensifies the inseparability of AIDS and gay males by "accepting the logic of religious fundamentalists—unspeakable acts have brought forth this disease" (Netzhammer & Shamp, 1994, p. 96).

American television programs in the 1990s continued to represent AIDS. Although a few shows have occasionally strived intentionally to break the representational link between gay men and AIDS (such as the AIDS story line on *ER*), many others (including *Everly Hills*, 90210, as discussed at length in the next section of this [chapter]) have continued to perpetuate this harmful pattern of media representation. This persistent representational approach has become especially suspect as the decade of the 1990s has progressed and the demographics of Americans being diagnosed with AIDS have undergone dramatic change. Today, reported cases of AIDS resulting from heterosexual transmission of HIV are rising steadily, with heterosexual women, heterosexual African American men, and heterosexual adolescents now comprising sizable high-risk groups for HIV transmission and AIDS (Tewksbury & Moore, 1997; Wright, 1997). Unfortunately,

because the earliest reported cases of AIDS were exclusively among gay men, the representation of AIDS in so many prime-time television offerings since the late 1980s has either explicitly or implicitly linked homosexuality and AIDS, framing AIDS as "a universal problem perpetuated by gays" (Altman, 1986; Netzhammer & Shamp, 1994, p. 92).

Despite such persistent representations of gay men in relation to AIDS, gay men ultimately entered the respect stage of representation on American television, as defined by Clark (1969), in the 1990s. The conservative Reagan-Bush era was drawing to a close, and President Bill Clinton was soon elected to office after actively seeking the support of gay men and lesbians for the first time in the history of presidential politics (McKinney & Pepper, 1999). Gay men achieved wider recognition and greater levels of social tolerance than in the past, and the major network prime-time shows began to increasingly represent diverse and inclusive gay male characters that cumulatively reflect the wide range of roles that gay men occupy in American society. In 1990, for example, the drama series *thirty-something* introduced two recurring gay male characters who ended up sleeping together and were shown together in bed. In 1992, the daytime soap opera *One Life to Live* featured a summer story line about a gay teen's self-discovery of his sexual orientation that culminated in an onscreen scene between the teen and his boyfriend ("Gay and Lesbian Suds," 1997). In the mid-1990s, the sitcom *Roseanne* introduced two recurring gay male characters—Roseanne's business partner Leon (Martin Mull) and his lover Scott (Fred Willard)—who ultimately participated in a wedding ceremony on the show. Beginning in 1995, producers of the daytime soap opera *All My Children* introduced several gay characters—high school history teacher, Michael Delaney (Chris Bruno); high school student, Kevin Sheffield (Ben Jorgensen); television station stage manager, Rudy (Lance Baldwin); and orthopedic specialist, Dr. Brad Phillips (Daniel

McDonald)—and went on to feature them in groundbreaking story lines, including the burgeoning romantic relationship between Michael and Brad that included a New Year's Eve proposal and the men establishing a joint life and home together (Kent, 1997).

By the time the ABC sitcom *Ellen* made television history in 1997 by introducing the first lesbian lead character on a prime-time series, regular and recurring gay male characters were present on a variety of prime-time shows, including *Chicago Hope*, *Cybill*, *Frasier*, *Melrose Place*, *Party of Five*, *Profiler*, *Roseanne*, *The Simpsons*, *Spin City*, and *Unhappily Ever After* ("GLAAD Scorecard," 1997). With the launch of the 1998-99 television season, there were more gay characters of color on American television than ever before, and *Will & Grace* introduced prime-time television's first gay male lead character ("TV," 1999). . . . The following discussion of the representation of gay men on Fox prime time highlights both the representational strides that have been made with regard to gay men over the past decade and the representational shortcomings that need yet to be more fully addressed.

♦ Representation of Gay Men on Fox Prime Time

. . . From its very beginning, the Fox network has owed a great deal of its success as an entrant into the television marketplace to its creative programming choices and strategies. The management at Fox believed that if the network was to compete effectively with the big three American television networks, they would need to draw from the same talent pool in order to provide appealing prime-time programs. As a result, to attract several of the top television producers who were constantly in demand, Fox made an implicit promise to offer

greater creative freedom than was possible at the big three networks, the opportunity to be far more daring in language use and overall content, and minimal network interference in day-to-day production processes of the shows it broadcasts (Block, 1990).

Fox soon became a creative magnet for television producers seeking to experiment and to push the content boundaries of the medium to new levels, which resulted in the creation and widespread popularity of such unique hits as *The Tracey Ullman Show*, *In Living Color*, and *Married . . . With Children* (Grover & Duffy, 1990).

Fox executives strived to ensure that their programs would always be less subject to mass-audience pressures than the offerings of the big three networks. "If we've got a good male action series," explained Fox network president Jamie Kellner in 1986, "we won't add children, dogs and females to make it appeal to other demographics" (Zoglin, 1986, p. 98). Further, as part of a conscious desire to appeal to a highly profitable, younger demographic target audience, the network remained more willing over time to test the boundaries of permissible content, as evident in various episodes of the oft-tasteless situation comedy *Married . . . With Children* and the half-hour comedy-skits program *In Living Color*, which featured a number of eyebrow-raising and sometimes controversial sketches such as "Riding Miss Daisy," a parody of the movie in which the chauffeur and his employer go at it in the back seat (Zoglin, 1990). This is the same program that offered one of the most pervasive early representations of gay men on the Fox network, in the form of a pair of flaming gay entertainment critics who dress stereotypically in delicate, brightly colored fabrics and snicker over sexually suggestive movie titles such as "Dick Tracy" and "Moby Dick" (Gray, 1995; Zoglin, 1990).

In the 1990s, Fox continued to provide a variety of popular programming geared primarily toward viewers between the ages of 18 and 34. Three of the network's most popular programs during this decade have

been *Beverly Hills, 90210*, *Melrose Place*, and *Party of Five*, and each of these programs has represented gay men in various ways over the years . . .

♦ Representing Gay Men on Beverly Hills, 90210

Having recently completed its tenth and final season, *Beverly Hills, 90210* appeared in the Fox prime-time lineup during the 1990-91 television season. Although early reviews of the show were mixed, this series about a Midwestern family transplanted to Beverly Hills, California, and its twin children, Brandon and Brenda Walsh, who began attending high school there emerged as a keeper while two other, more critically embraced high-school-based shows—NBC's *Hill High* and *Ferris Bueller*—vanished quickly without a trace (Litwin, 1991).

By the end of its first season, *Beverly Hills, 90210* had established itself as a demographic magnet for teenage and young-adult viewers, and only recently has the show's appeal begun to fade. A major goal of this series from its inception, as series creator Darren Star has explained, has been to provide a truthful, sophisticated show that would speak to younger television viewers the same way that the series *thirtysomething* spoke to members of its generation (Litwin, 1991). As the series has progressed over the years and the characters have graduated from both high school and college and entered the working world, the show's commitment to representing noteworthy social problems and conditions has persisted (Hart, 1999). Thus, because so many episodes of the show have dealt in from substance abuse by teens and adults to clinical depression and homelessness, viewers likely expected to encounter a similar same sort of prosocial treatment regarding the topic of gay men. They have not usually received this sort of treatment, however.

after which this gay character disappeared from visibility entirely.

Three seasons later, near the start of the 1996-97 television season, *90210* introduced a third gay character as part of a three-week story line about AIDS. This time around, character Kelly Taylor began working at an AIDS hospice in exchange for college credit, where she met an aspiring gay magician named Jimmy (Michael Stoyanov). As the first AIDS episode unfolded, Kelly and Jimmy began to converse frequently and think of each other as friends, which suggested that the entire AIDS story line would be one about caring for others in times of need, despite individual differences (including those of sexual orientation). The second AIDS episode, however, revealed that this was not what the story line was ultimately going to be about after all. In that episode, Kelly disappeared from Jimmy's life, despite what appeared to be their burgeoning friendship, after he cut his hand while preparing dinner and she got some of his blood on her own hands. Despite Jimmy's assurances that her odds of contracting HIV that way were one in a million, subsequent scenes in the episode presented Kelly relentlessly washing her hands and making excuses as to why she could not revisit Jimmy at the hospice. It was only after Kelly's doctor assured her that unbroken skin posed a barrier to the virus contained in Jimmy's blood and an HIV test revealed that she was HIV-negative that Kelly renewed her relationship with Jimmy. At that moment, however, despite looking and acting as if he were in remarkably good health, Jimmy informed Kelly that the end was near. He was right. The content of the third and final AIDS episode wrapped up the story line quite efficiently, as Jimmy's health took a sudden downturn and he died. With the exception of a brief replay clip featuring Jimmy on his deathbed at the start of the following week's episode, neither Jimmy nor the risk of HIV/AIDS was mentioned again in the weeks and months that followed.

Beverly Hills, 90210 first represented the issue of gay male sexuality early in the show's second season, in the form of the "confused" teen. During a series of summer days at the beach, regular character Kelly Taylor (Jennie Garth) could not figure out why an attractive male teen did not seem interested in her sexually, even though he seemed to like her. When the sense of rejection Kelly was feeling began to endanger her self-esteem, she finally confronted the object of her affections about his sexual orientation. "Are you gay?" she asked him directly. "No—I don't know," he responded, before the two agreed to remain friends. From an ideological standpoint, this treatment of homosexuality enabled the series to take up the issue of homosexuality without actually taking up the issue at all, since the "confused" teen represents "potential" homosexuality rather than "actual" homosexuality . . .

The series represented gay men next near the end of its fourth season, when the car in which regular characters Brandon Walsh (Jason Priestley) and Steve Sanders (Ian Ziering) were riding broke down near a gay coffee house. Once inside to use a pay telephone, Steve glimpsed the president of his fraternity, Mike Ryan, surrounded by gay patrons. Panicked by what he saw, Steve thereafter feared the moment when Mike might make "one move on [him], one gesture, one look," and, after another fraternity brother jokingly questioned Steve's own heterosexuality, Steve shared the information of Mike's "deviant" sexual orientation. By episode's end, distressed at his own homophobia (as pointed out by his friends) and the likely implications of his actions, Steve convinced the other fraternity brothers to allow Mike to remain in the fraternity and as its president. To some extent, therefore, the representation of gay men in this episode was a positive one, since Mike—the attractive fraternity president and skilled athlete—was presented sympathetically and defied stereotypes of gay men. At the same time, however, this episode treated homosexuality as a problem to be dealt with,

Representing Gay Men on Melrose Place

Although 90210 did a somewhat admirable job of portraying Jimmy as an articulate, well-adjusted, sympathetic character who defied traditional stereotypes, there is simply no denying that the reinforcement of the representational link between gay men and AIDS was completely unnecessary in this instance. . . . Had the decision instead been made to feature a central character with AIDS who was not a gay male, the series would have made a significant representational stride toward undermining the conceptualization of AIDS as a "gay disease," rather than reinforcing this stereotypical notion. Although it appeared that 90210 was preparing to explore the issue of HIV/AIDS and heterosexual women at the start of the show's ninth season—after regular character Valerie Malone (Tiffani-Amber Thiessen) had unprotected sex with an intravenous drug user and was awaiting the results of her HIV test during the final episode of the eighth season—the series backed away from that promising story line entirely by giving Valerie a clean bill of health less than five minutes into the start of the next season.

During the show's eighth season, *Beverly Hills, 90210* introduced a handful of other gay male characters in brief story lines pertaining to a gay teen who became estranged from his parents after revealing his sexual orientation, as well as a gay couple who had faced several years' worth of difficulty attempting to adopt a child. Although the show presented all three of these gay men as likable, sympathetic characters, the primary function they served was to enable the show's regular characters to confront their own homophobic impulses and then to resurface as the gay characters' heroes—much as the character Steve did in his interactions with the fraternity president in the fourth season—rather than to motivate a thorough exploration of issues of significance to gay men in American society. . . .

Having spun off from *Beverly Hills, 90210* in 1992, *Melrose Place* presents the daily adventures of a group of young adults with ties to the same Los Angeles apartment complex. In contrast to the representation of gay men on 90210, however, this series included a regular gay male character, Matt Fielding (Doug Savant), from its inception and until the start of its sixth season in 1997. By featuring a gay male character each week who was consistently likable, well-adjusted, and civic-minded, *Melrose Place* took a major step forward in the representational right direction. Unfortunately, the primary shortcoming of the resulting representation of gay men on this show stems from the reality that Matt has alternately qualified as the "most straight" gay male character in modern television offerings (during the show's first two seasons) as well as the poster boy for dysfunctional gay relationships (during the character's final three seasons on the show). . . .

Matt left Los Angeles on the first episode of the show's sixth season to complete his residency at an AIDS research facility in San Francisco. He disappeared without a trace, taking the visibility of gay characters with him as he departed. Then, in a surprising move early in the show's seventh (and final) season, Matt (never shown on screen) was killed in a Los Angeles automobile accident while supposedly on his way to a reunion dinner organized by Amanda (Heather Locklear). As such, the gay male character who had been gone for more than one season was symbolically reintroduced only to be sacrificed, eradicating his "deviance" once and for all. In all, although the regular presence of Matt Fielding challenged mediated heterosexism to some extent each week through the ongoing representation

of a gay man on screen, Matt's character ultimately proved to be a "groundbreaking" one primarily only in the sense that he consistently pushed the limits of dysfunctional gay relationships to newer and greater extremes.

Representing Gay Men on Party of Five

Fox's *Party of Five* follows the lives of the Salingers, five siblings who remain determined to stay together as a family unit following the unexpected death of their parents. This one-hour drama series, winner of the 1996 Golden Globe Award for Best Drama Series, has featured the recurring gay male character Ross (Mitchell Anderson) from its inception, who serves as the music instructor to teen violinist Claudia Salinger (Lacey Chabert).

During *Party of Five*'s first season in 1994-95, Claudia and her siblings wrestled with issues of homophobia and acceptance of others despite individual differences after Ross came out to his student, and the Salinger clan came to Ross's assistance months later when Ross encountered obstacles resulting from his sexual orientation in his attempt to adopt a baby. Both of these episodes were thoughtfully presented, and the reality that Ross, as a single gay male, successfully adopted a beautiful baby girl and served as a wonderful parent to her was a representational victory for gay men in American society. During the rest of this first season and throughout the second season, Ross was consistently presented as a likable, well-adjusted, sincere, caring gay man and father who helped Claudia to expand her range of musical talents and the Salinger family to deal with the emotional situations they regularly encountered.

During the show's third season, in contrast, Ross was rarely presented on screen, and the only episode that featured his character in any significant way involved his

burgeoning romantic relationship with an English teacher, Mr. Archer, at Claudia's school. Like Matt on *Melrose Place*, Ross believed that he had finally met the man of his dreams, and all went well initially. Soon, however, Ross learned that the teacher was not secure with his sexual orientation and that he felt the need to keep his relationship with Ross completely under wraps, concealing it even from his mother and close others. Although Ross decided to end this romantic relationship immediately rather than remain involved with someone who appeared to be ashamed of him—which from a representational standpoint was a positive decision, challenging the stereotype that gay men must simply settle for whatever relationships they can find—this story line nevertheless reinforced the view persistent in Fox prime time that romantic happiness is not to be found by gay men living in the modern age.

Again during the fourth season of *Party of Five*, Ross's visibility decreased to the point of no return. In what initially appeared to be the character's last appearance on the show (and only his second brief appearance that season), Ross attended the wedding ceremony of Julia (Neve Campbell) and Griffin (Jeremy London) alone, at which he stereotypically sang show tunes to a young girl who got locked in a bathroom. On that note, the most promising (from the standpoint of prosocial media representation) gay male character in Fox prime time disappeared (almost) without a trace. He resurfaced only for a few minutes later in the show's fifth season to commiserate with Claudia about how it feels to love somebody one cannot have, and then again for a few minutes during the show's sixth and final season to help Claudia refocus her attention on her musical abilities. . . .

Concluding Remarks

. . . The examples presented in this [chapter] reveal not only how much progress has

been made regarding the representation of gay men on American television in recent decades but also how much progress has yet to be made.

Certainly, including gay male characters as recurring, regular, and lead characters in American television programs is a crucial first step toward enhancing the overall representation of gay men on American television. What the producers and writers of such programs opt to do with those characters once they exist, however, is equally important. Care must be devoted to consciously avoiding outdated, stereotypical representations of AIDS that thoughtlessly link the disease almost exclusively with gay men, the inclusion of gay story lines only when their outcomes will be negative, and the reduction of diverse gay communities to a singular, stereotypical "lifestyle" or presumed way of life.

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