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Source: *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 6 (Jul., 1995), pp. 692-711

Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784760>

Accessed: 10/05/2010 08:36

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THE COSBY SHOW

The View From the Black Middle Class

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Now that we have seen the final April 30, 1992, episode the television series *The Cosby Show*, "And So We Commence," we can examine the social and historical impact on its audiences. Commentators in the mass media have asserted that one of the show's greatest consequences was its help in improving race relations by projecting universal values that both Whites and Blacks could identify with, using the tried-and-true situation comedy format (Ehrenstein, 1988; Gray, 1989; Johnson, 1986; Norment, 1985; Stevens, 1987). Believing that television mirrors society and articulates its values, proponents of this perspective point to the overwhelming popularity of the show among White viewers as well as its almost entirely positive assessment by White analysts and the White media. For many seasons, the show was highly rated and has been credited, among other consequences, with reviving the genre of the sitcom and saving the ailing NBC network (Curry, 1986; Frank & Zweig, 1988; Poussaint, 1988; Taylor, 1989).

However, a few recent researchers have suggested that, to the contrary, the show's popularity has set back race relations because its view of Black assimilation fails to take into account the context of the world outside of the four walls of the Huxtable household (Teachout, 1986) and because it allows Whites to excuse institutional discrimination and to become desensitized to racial inequality (Gates, 1992). They do this by asserting that if Black people fail, they only have themselves to blame because any White person can point out the successful, affluent Black family on *The Cosby Show*

and confirm their beliefs that affirmative action is no longer needed because Blacks now enjoy the same opportunities as Whites (Gates, 1992).

In a recent book, *Enlightened Racism* (1992), Lewis and Jhally report on White focus groups that watched *The Cosby Show* as part of the recent research project. They found a contradiction in White responses to the show. On the one hand, the show was taken by Whites as proving that anyone can make it in the United States and that Black Americans should stop complaining about discrimination. On the other, the Whites articulated the view that the *Cosbys* were not like most Black Americans. This contradiction is rationalized by the Whites in the study by the failure and laziness of other Blacks. "The Huxtables proved that black people can succeed; yet in so doing they also prove the inferiority of black people in general (who have, in comparison with whites, failed)" (Lewis & Jhally, 1992, p. 95).

Lewis and Jhally (1992, pp. 113-117) also deal briefly with some Black reactions to *The Cosby Show* and other comedy shows starring Black comedians. They used a general group of mixed-status Black Americans in Springfield, Massachusetts. In the data that follow, we go beyond their brief analysis to examine the reactions to *The Cosby Show* in greater depth. And we examine the reactions of middle-class and upper middle-class Black Americans whose class position is close to that of the Huxtables in *The Cosby Show*. How do middle-class and upper middle-class Black Americans view the show? Is their reaction positive? Do middle-class Blacks accept *The Cosby Show* version of Black assimilation and integration into America: the color-blind society where African Americans, European Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans can all interact as human beings without any mention of or even a hint of racial differences being problematic? Can this Black middle-class audience relate to a Black middle-class lifestyle in which neither the doctor-father nor the lawyer-mother nor any of the school-age children ever experience racism or discrimination in their everyday lives?

Or do middle-class Blacks perceive *The Cosby Show* in a more negative manner? Do they believe that the show depicts a false

image of assimilation and helps to foster the backlash against affirmative action? Or, perhaps rather than totally positive or totally negative reactions, there is more of an ambivalence among middle-class Blacks. Perhaps they feel that it is good to see any Blacks on television who are shown in a positive light instead of as the usual pimps, prostitutes, and maids reflecting the "Sambo syndrome" (Fife, 1974). On the other hand, they might suggest that *The Cosby Show* is an exceptionally positive portrayal in the same vein as the "Shaft syndrome" (referring to a popular, well-made motion picture from the 1970s with a Black cast). As such, the Cosby portrayal would be as distorting as the previously excessively negative ones, in the sense that Blacks are still being shown in an exaggerated fashion rather than as ordinary, everyday human beings, some good, some bad, with others all along the good-bad spectrum.

Given the pervasive impact of the mass media, particularly television (Asante, 1976; Case & Greeley, 1990; Goodlet, 1974; Holz & Wright, 1979; Leckenby & Surlin, 1976; Stroman, 1986), and especially the fact that Blacks watch more television than Whites and place more confidence in it (Bales, 1986; Comstock & Cobbey, 1979; Kassarian, 1973; Stroman & Becker, 1978), it is important to examine the way in which Blacks have been portrayed. Television research has documented that the portrayal of Blacks in that and other mass mediums has always been inadequate and stereotypical and generally has portrayed Black Americans as comedic characters (Carter, 1988; Fife, 1974; Gates, 1992; O'Kelly & Bloomquist, 1976; Seggar, 1977). Moreover, research has shown the extent to which Blacks are underrepresented in all positions in the television industry. These data patterns underscore the need for a careful examination of Black middle-class responses to *The Cosby Show*.

THE DEBATE OVER THE COSBY SHOW

The Cosby Show began on September 20, 1984. The TV public was introduced to Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable, an obstetrician married to an attorney, played by Phylicia Rashad. The couple and their five

children lived in a New York City brownstone and were clearly “Black middle class” at a time when that group was beginning to be recognized in the mass media. Indeed, they were upper middle class. The curtain-closing show, “And So We Commence” was on April 30, 1992, and had the extended Huxtable family prepare to celebrate the only son’s graduation from New York University. During its 8-year, 198-episode run, *The Cosby Show* was lauded as a major milestone in popular entertainment: the first all-Black program that avoided racial stereotyping. Records reveal that the show was the top-rated show of the 1980s and the most-watched sitcom in television history. Bill Cosby, one of the show’s creators, said he was returning to TV to save viewers from a “vast wasteland.” He went on to explain his reasons for creating the show in an interview with Robert Johnson (1992, p. 57), editor of *Jet* magazine. Cosby told Johnson that he was tired of what he was seeing on television—tired of the car chases, the hookers with the Black pimps. Cosby believed that he could send vital messages along with the positive images of a Black family: Children are the same all over (Johnson, 1986, p. 29).

Bill Cosby has responded to most criticisms lodged against his show during its 8-year run. For example, in answer to critics who urged him to deal with more critical racial issues, Cosby’s response was that he would not let critics write his show and would not allow neoliberals to affect the image that the *Cosby* cast projects as a family (Johnson, 1992, p. 60). Further, Cosby asserts that this criticism is unfair and holds him up to a different standard because other situation comedies are not expected to address pressing social problems such as racism: He stated that other shows, such as *Three’s Company*, are not asked to deal with racism. Moreover, he feels that the show has addressed some tough social issues. For example, Cosby stated that the show consistently has addressed sexism as an issue, showing in a creative and humorous way how it should be resisted and debunked; at the same time, the show confronted the issue of machismo and promoted a richer understanding of fatherhood and a fuller meaning of manhood (Dyson, 1989, p. 28). Additionally, whether through Cosby’s wearing of collegiate sweatshirts or in the form of his spin-off program, *A Different*

World, the show consistently sent out messages about the importance of Black academic institutions and the importance of Blacks supporting these institutions. This reflects Cosby's deep commitment to Black colleges surviving as an American institution (Cheers, 1987, p. 28).

Other criticisms lodged against the show were that it was not "Black" enough because the family life being portrayed is not realistic and that the show minimizes Black issues because it is a comedy rather than a dramatic series. In answer to critics who assert that the family being portrayed is not realistic enough, Cosby said, "I am not an expert on blackness" (Stevens, 1987, p. 80) and that the show is about parents loving their children and giving them understanding. It is about people respecting each other (Johnson, 1992, p. 60). He goes on to proclaim that although the show uses a new gimmick of centering on the parents rather than the children, without the children in the cast, the show just would not work (Davidson, 1986, p. 32). In support of the show, one writer has argued that a useful aspect of Cosby's dismantling of stereotyping and racial mythology is that it permits America to view Blacks as human beings, and it has shown that many concerns human beings have transcend race (Dyson, 1989, p. 29). Alvin Poussaint (1988, p. 72), a Harvard psychiatrist and the show's psychological consultant, asserts that the Huxtables helped to dispel old stereotypes and to move the show's audience toward a more realistic perception of Blacks. Like Whites, Blacks should be portrayed on television in a full spectrum of roles and cultural styles and such an array of styles should not be challenged. Moreover, according to Poussaint, the Black culture of the characters comes through in their speech, intonations, and nuances; Black music, art, and dance are frequently displayed and Black books and authors are often mentioned (p. 74).

Finally, in response to those who complain that the show is a comedy rather than being more dramatic, Cosby maintains that each episode educates and informs even though the show's format is a situation comedy that entertains. He states that the shows are funny, with a caring, loving, feeling story line, and that the audience sitting at home will recognize themselves in the characters (Johnson, 1986, p. 30). Moreover, one author admonishes Blacks to stop looking to

TV for social liberation because "the revolution will not be televised" (Gates, 1992, p. 317).

OUR RESEARCH STUDY

To examine the Black middle-class response to *The Cosby Show*, we draw primarily on 100 in-depth interviews from a larger study of 210 middle-class Black Americans in 16 cities across the United States. The interviewing was done in 1988-1990; Black interviewers were used. We began with respondents known as members of the Black middle class to knowledgeable consultants in key cities. Snowball sampling from these multiple starting points was used to maximize diversity.

The questions in the research instrument were primarily designed to elicit detailed information on the general situations of the respondents and on the barriers encountered and managed in employment, education, and housing. The specific question used for this study asked about the portrayal of Blacks in the media. There were no specific questions about *The Cosby Show*; the discussion of that particular television program was volunteered in response to the general question about the media's portrayal of Black Americans. These volunteered responses signal the importance of this show. Although we report below mainly on the responses of the 100 respondents who detailed specific reactions to *The Cosby Show*, in interpreting the Black middle-class response to *The Cosby Show* we also draw on some discussions in a larger sample of 117 interviews in which *The Cosby Show* was mentioned.

Middle class was defined broadly as those holding a white-collar job (including those in professional, managerial, and clerical jobs), college students preparing for white-collar jobs, and owners of successful businesses. This definition is consistent with recent analyses of the Black middle class (Landry, 1987). The subsample of 100 middle-class Blacks reporting a response to *The Cosby Show* is fairly representative of the demographic characteristics of the larger sample. The subsample's occupational distribution is broadly similar to the larger sample and includes university professors,

college administrators, elementary and secondary teachers, physicians, attorneys, dentists, entrepreneurs, business managers and executives, doctoral students, and three retirees. There are roughly equal numbers of males (48) and females (52). The subsample has 23% younger than the age of 35, 63% between 35 and 50, and 14% older than the age of 50. All the respondents have at least a high school diploma, and 96% have some college, including 46% with advanced degrees. The modal income level is \$56,000 or more, with 51% reporting this income. Seventeen percent report incomes between \$36,000 and \$55,000; 27% have incomes less than \$35,000; and five refused to disclose their income levels.

VIEWING THE SHOW AS UNREALISTIC

The Black middle-class responses to *The Cosby Show* were ambivalent, reflecting both negative and positive aspects. Even the negative comments were often mixed with a positive preface, such as "I really like *The Cosby Show*, but. . ." or "I'm happy to see some positive images of Blacks on TV, but. . ." In many of the answers, there clearly is a dialectical tension, with a recognition of both the positive and the negative features of the program. For example, many negative responses centered on the show not providing a realistic portrayal of a Black family, or of a Black middle-class family. Yet many also felt that the show accurately reflected their own lifestyle and that of their friends.

Among our respondents, one common criticism of *The Cosby Show* was its lack of realism. As the following set of negative responses illustrate, the problem lies with the stereotypical nature of an upper middle-class Black family that never experiences problems, especially racial problems. One respondent commented on the lack of tragedy this way: "And then *The Cosby Show*, well, they just got too love-happy for me, it's just too good. They used to have real problems that they were faced with, and now, what's the problem? Someone wears someone else's dress, what is that?"

The absence of serious tragedy like that faced by Black Americans in the real world caused many to speak of the lack of realism

in the program: “*Cosby* is not real. One of the things that disturbs me is this house is always immaculate, there’s no maid, the mother’s an attorney who works all day, the father’s a doctor who works all day, the children are out of the house all day. Who does the laundry? Who cleans up the house? Who prepares the meals? You see them cook a specialty dish from time to time, that’s not for real.”

One aspect of the unreality is the casting of the father and mother as upper middle-class professionals. One middle-class respondent focused on the family context, including the likelihood of doctor-lawyer heads of household: “My issue with *Cosby* is, how real is it? I mean, how many Black families do you know where the father’s a doctor and the mother’s a lawyer, and all the kids are wonderfully well behaved, and they all deal at a psychological and emotional level of understanding? And so while I personally love *The Cosby Show*, I do question how real it is.”

This questioning of the doctor-lawyer team came up a number of times and was connected to other issues. Another respondent noted the lack of attention to the racial trials: “I think if children, if people, if anybody looked at *The Cosby Show*, they’d think that everybody in the Black community has arrived like that, and it’s just not true. I think it’s wonderful that they portray a doctor and lawyer together working, and they live in a brownstone on a regular street, and they have children and everybody’s hunky-dory. They never portray the trials and tribulations that families have. Or, if they do portray them, they portray them in a humorous light. But I think that it could be more realistic.”

Another respondent wondered about the stereotyped character of a Black family like Huxtables, who do not grapple with barriers like discrimination: “I think he’s a doctor and she’s a lawyer, so I think it’s an upper middle-class family. And it’s just stereotyped. Nothing like that goes on in the family life every day. No family life runs smooth like that. You know, why not portray a family life story on television if you’re going to use Blacks, and make it show the hard times that Blacks do run into? Why give it like it’s all peaches and cream when it’s not?”

Rather than viewing the Huxtables as role models, one father lamented the difficulty of explaining to his children why they don’t

live like the Cosbys: "I do know that this is just entertainment. But my kids think it's the way we should live. That is unfair. It is unfair for me to explain to my son that, no, mom is not a lawyer, dad is not a doctor, and these things don't work that way. I think it's really sad."

BLACKS IN WHITEFACE?

The unreality of the show has other dimensions, including a too White image of Black culture. For example, one male respondent criticized the false image of assimilation to White culture as presented by *The Cosby Show*. "A false image. Again, it seem like something out of a fantasy, of people living the good life, acting assimilated, the so-called new-generation type people that really don't exist. If you walk the streets of America, you see something totally different. . . . The type of Blacks who have made it, everybody's happy, the don't-worry-be-happy type of Black people, again, it's a total farce, and they don't represent what the Black masses in this country are really like."

Another respondent accused the Huxtables of being "White people in blackface" and not a true representation of Black America. "From one extreme, you have the family on *The Cosby Show*. The happy-go-lucky Negro family that's made it. To me, all you're looking at are White people in blackface performing on television. That may be true to a certain extent, that may be going on, but it's not a true representation of the Black experience in America."

One female critic suggested that the show could be a "little less White," particularly in the area of problem-solving techniques. "Then you have the other extreme with Bill Cosby, that everybody is professional. And that's true, we have a lot of that. But the way problems are treated, I think is a little off the wall. I think it could be a little less White. I think that we just treat problems a little bit differently, because, let's face it, whether we're professional or not, we all came from nothing. And we still don't have that totally White mentality about problem solving."

This commentary adds another dimension to our understanding of the fear fostered by assimilation. This respondent may be suggesting that the history of today's Blacks would not allow them to work out problems in the same manner that Whites would. The decline

of segregation has allowed Black Americans to deal with their children in ways different from the days of segregation, indeed in ways similar to those of Whites. Under segregation, Black youngsters were usually taught to be deferential and self-effacing, often through harsh child-rearing practices admonishing a child not to speak unless spoken to and not to stare anyone in the eye. Because conditions have improved somewhat, many Black parents now encourage children in the same ways that White parents do, to be assertive, independent, and curious. There may also be a suggestion here that the Black approach to problem solving in some matters is still different in unspecified ways from that of White Americans, perhaps that there is a Black culture or African background to be considered.

These examples provide insight into the character of the criticisms that see the show as unreal. The general complaint is not that the show is an unreal portrait of a family, but of a Black family. Cosby has argued that he is trying to show what true assimilation would be like, not what it already is—all racial and ethnic groups interacting as neighbors and friends without regard for physical differences.

There is a clear suggestion in our interviews that the Huxtables do not reflect most Black Americans. For many of our middle-class respondents, this is problematic. Some had problems with the illusion of perfect integration whereby Black middle-class families no longer experience any racial problems and would in effect “live happily ever after.” It seems that an underlying wish of these Black critics is that television shows featuring Blacks should be harder hitting and more realistic. There is a call here for greater seriousness in dealing with the Black experience, and a rejection of a happy-go-lucky stereotype of Black America. They have difficulty with a fantasy portrait of Black characters. None mentioned that if Black life as a whole is biting and difficult, then a show that is an escapist medium is useful. Only recently does there seem to be a push for seriousness and documentaries depicting only real-life dramas.

THE POSITIVE VIEW: TV AS FANTASY

In our interviews, the negative responses are more than equaled by positive responses. Sometimes, particular individuals seem to

be in a dialogue with themselves or their friends and relatives on these matters, for there is often an ambivalence about *The Cosby Show*.

A number of our middle-class respondents echoed Bill Cosby's response to some of his critics in regard to demanding too much in the way of realism from a show on television: "The problem I have with *Cosby* is the comments people make, in particular our own people, like what Black family has a doctor and a lawyer for a mom and dad and three or four well-behaved kids. They can't believe that could happen. And some White people too. And I sit and think well, that's just as real as the Bionic Man, or Superman, or Batman and Robin. I mean, you don't see us walking around in tights with big Ss on our shirts."

"The *Cosby* sort of thing . . . isn't like most Black families. But then I'm not sure that you ought to expect television to portray anything realistically. I don't think they portray any family realistically, so why would they ever portray the Black family realistically, either?"

"It's not honest? Well, so what? So is almost everything else that you see on television. So why can't we be on television being fake? Or from that perspective, yeah, let us get somebody being fake, just like everybody else. It's an entertainment medium."

These positive assessments underscore the complexity of Black responses to Black-oriented shows. Explicit in these positive quotes is the idea that *The Cosby Show* is indeed unrealistic but so is most of television. The public does not ask other TV shows to be accurate representations of real life. In their view, because the public enjoys other shows that are just as fantasy oriented as *The Cosby Show*, for example, *The Bionic Woman* or *The Six Million Dollar Man*, it is not fair to expect that when Blacks are involved that the shows provide both entertainment and great realism.

EVERYDAY LIFE AND ROLE MODELS

Some of the positive comments took the form of acknowledging that the experiences on the show paralleled their own: "I think that . . . *Cosby* is an excellent example of our life and our family." "*Cosby* parallels quite significantly my family life and that of my

friends, particularly those who have teenagers or children of a wide variety of age ranges. And that's particularly a family joke with several of our friends, because we look at *Cosby* to see what's going to happen in our lives that week." These respondents are selecting out of the show's account of the Black experience common family problems. Others who had a positive view of the show were happy with the portrayal of Blacks in a positive light in order to counteract the many negative portrayals of Black Americans in the mass media, and thus in the White mind: "I think that it's about time that White America sees Black America in a positive, natural environment." "I wish we had more shows like . . . *Cosby* on TV, where you have a Black doctor, and the wife is a lawyer, because they do exist. I mean they're on a small scale, percentage-wise, but they do exist. And I think we take too many negatives and blow them up." "I thought it was good that Black people, and Whites, could see that we all don't live in ghettos and projects and kill each other." "There are a lot of Black families that have doctors and lawyers and stuff like that, you just don't ever hear about them, people don't write stories about them." Clearly, these middle-class Black Americans are concerned about the tendency of the media, and White Americans, to exaggerate the image of Black Americans as criminals and deviant.

Those who affirm the show's merits see *Cosby's* portrayal of Black men and Black families very positively: "*Cosby* is probably the only show, I think, that portrays Black men in a positive role." "I think that no question Bill Cosby has done a tremendous amount. And I think he portrays and projects a very, very positive image, what we need to see more." "Because I think it is a family together, and it shows that Black men can be leaders in their families, yet at the same time be responsible." One respondent emphasized the importance of stressing the commonality of the values of all Americans, regardless of racial and ethnic background: "I think that I am glad to see them portraying Blacks in middle-class roles, and realizing that Black people, Black middle-class people, have some of the same values as White middle class, Hispanic middle class, or Oriental middle class. It's not necessarily a race that determines it, it's just middle-class people sometimes have similar values. So I'm glad to see that they are now portraying Blacks okay. *The Cosby*

Show and these other shows that are coming on TV, you know, we both have some of the same values." This means that the general image of Black Americans as being like other Americans is an important contribution of *The Cosby Show*.

THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Other respondents noted the importance of *The Cosby Show* within the Black community. They enjoyed the Huxtable family portrayal because it offered Black role models, positive values, and important messages for Black Americans: "I'm pleased with the *Cosby* portrayal because I think it sets a good example for younger Black children, not so much in the stereotypical 'when I grow up I'm going to be a doctor' kind of thing, but just in the overall quality of life and the values." "But I didn't see that being unrealistic, the type of family, a doctor and a lawyer. I didn't see that as being unrealistic. There's quite a few Black doctors and Black lawyers, so I thought that was a good image builder for the kids." "I think you could look around this great country of America for the next 708 years, and I don't think you're ever going to find a Huxtable family. But hey, you know, to me it creates a dream. I've always believed that if you can see it in your mind, it's possible. And like the Cos, he plays a doctor. Hey, a little 5-year-old Black kid, I want to be a doctor just like Heathcliff. That's cool. I like that." To be able to see a Black female lawyer, a Black doctor, and Black youngsters going to college is a very positive incentive for inner-city Black children who may not see those same types in their own neighborhoods. Here the accent is on positive role models for Black children. Others commented in a general vein: "It's ideal. It's family structured. It's something basic. It has good moral . . . everything you want to look for is in that show." "I do like *The Cosby Show* because [it] delivers a whole bunch of messages, to African Americans in particular. You know if you watch it, there's always a message." "Bill Cosby, I love Bill Cosby. It's not a put-on, it's true family setting. You've got a doctor and a lawyer, but you do have that. But they deal with down-to-earth issues, realistic issues. So, I think that's a pretty good image." The importance of positive role

models for all Black Americans, not just for children, is a significant theme here and in the rest of the interviews.

THE FAILURE TO ADDRESS SOCIAL ISSUES

Another major category of criticism is related to those just discussed, that *The Cosby Show* does not address any important racial or other social issues, particularly those facing Black Americans today. The following quote illustrates this criticism. "They're not fully representative, that's for sure. Yes, we see the successful Cosby family, but that's only a slice of the average American Black family. The family is completely advantaged. They have both parents, they're together. They're both fully employed. And they have a happy environment. That family appears to be insulated from racism. Everything's always so wonderful on their block. Well, shoot, that doesn't happen. . . . So, it's misleading. It leaves you with a flicker of hope that's not realistic and doesn't give us enough information about what to do if your family isn't like that, isn't ideal, isn't two parent, or isn't really healthy. No one ever gets sick on *The Cosby Show*. No one has a debilitating illness. Cosby has not chosen to address sexual abuse. He's minimally addressed substance abuse on there, and he's rarely talked about sex. That's not reality at all. None of those daughters have had unwanted pregnancies." This respondent suggests that the show has not dealt with any of the major problems facing Black Americans, including questions of racism or unwed pregnancies. There is a tough call for the program to be more than a situation comedy. Other respondents expanded on the theme of the failure to deal with racial discrimination: "I have a problem with the fact that *The Cosby Show* will build a 30-minute episode around Heathcliff Huxtable building a hero sandwich. Why aren't we dealing with, and I'm not saying do this every week, but every now and then why aren't we dealing with some real issues that are confronting the Black middle class. Yeah, there are some people who live like that . . . what happened to me in the courtroom, if I'm an attorney, or what racist thing happened to me in the hospital, if I'm a surgeon. That's what they come home

talking about, and yes their kids go to NYU and other great universities like that, but what they come home talking about is what this racist professor said and did. And I don't see that occurring on *The Cosby Show*." "It is not indicative of what Black life is really like. You would think that when Theo goes out he never has problems except in dealing with his buddies. Or that when his mother goes about her legal duties as a lawyer that she never confronts discrimination." On the air, the Huxtable family never faces or copes with discrimination. Although asking a comedy show to deal seriously with such issues as sexual abuse may be asking too much, these respondents do point to the serious issue of racial discrimination at the middle-class level. Upper middle-class Black Americans experience much discrimination, and it is overt, recognizable, and everyday. Because this discrimination is common and daily, it does not seem unreasonable to expect that a Black lawyer or doctor, and certainly a Black college student, would experience it and deal with it in daily life.

A SUBTLE TREATMENT OF RACISM

None of our respondents explicitly disagreed with the criticisms just noted. On the overt level, they agreed that *The Cosby Show* does not deal with racism and discrimination. However, at another level there is a battle going on against racism. One respondent noted that *Cosby* tends to approach the problem of racism in a subtle way, by allusion and indirection: "But at another level they deal with a lot of issues in a rather subtle way. There was an episode where Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech was being watched by the family at the very end of the show, after I think there had been different family squabbles." This subtle treatment was examined eloquently by a professor: "In the show you can see a kind of intervention against racism, by the depiction of a family that is not totally constructed by racism. They have a life that speaks to Black art, Black music, including a traditionally Black college. But having said all that, the very scarcity of representations of racism means that one can look at *The Cosby Show* and decide on the basis of just that representation that everything is OK, when everything is very

much not OK. So what might be itself fairly harmless under one set of circumstances, ends up being hideously harmful under another set of circumstances.”

What comes out as positive from a Black point of view, the ability to live outside of racism for a time, becomes negative when Whites take the absence of racism to mean that things are fine for Black Americans. This problem is underscored in the study by Lewis and Jhally (1992), where they conclude that for many of their White respondents “the Huxtables’ achievement for the American dream leads them to a world where race no longer matters. This enables white viewers to combine an impeccable liberal attitude toward race with a deep-rooted suspicion of black people” (p. 110). In this way, *The Cosby Show* functions for Whites in a way much different from the way it functions for Blacks. It panders to the limits of White acceptance of Black Americans in the late 20th century.

BLACK LIFE ONLY AS COMEDY?

We have seen in the previous analyses some tendency to negatively or positively judge the show’s content. The following responses are directed at the genre of the show. Similar to earlier comments, these critics feel that always seeing Blacks in situation comedies indicates that Black life and Black issues are not taken seriously. “True, *Cosby* has a great Black image, but basically, it’s still a situation comedy. It’s still comic. It’s still laughter. It’s still entertainment. It’s not real, intense drama.” “In terms of Black portrayals in television, it’s a rather sad commentary that Blacks as clowns, or Blacks as those who laugh, continues to be the main image that’s portrayed. . . . It’s still clear that Blacks as humans that have to deal with a variety of serious issues doesn’t seem to get across . . . it hasn’t dealt seriously enough with topics that Blacks in general have to face.” “*The Cosby Show* shows a set of affluent Blacks, but still it’s a situation comedy. There are no shows that can deal with the Black person seriously, as a serious person. It seems like in order to discuss Black issues, you have to laugh.” One respondent took a more positive approach to *Cosby*’s achievements

in his comedy show: "I'm a firm believer that the strength of the Black community is always in the family, and they're starting to show Blacks in a strong family situation. I think *The Cosby Show* started that instead of the slapstick comedy type. I think we're still not taken seriously because all of those are still in the sitcom type situation. I think it's difficult for most people to accept that Blacks have normal family problems, and they deal with them similarly as they do." A clear advantage is that Cosby has moved the situation comedy to a level beyond that of the more typical Sambo-type Black comedy. This puts the earlier comments into greater perspective. These last two responses seem to be arguing the case for the importance of class position over racial identity. These comments raise the important question as to why White Americans have a "comfort zone," which means that Whites will only watch those Black shows with which they feel comfortable. Because White viewers have the numbers to make or break a show and influence its sponsors, they are the ones whose interests are usually met. Why is the White comfort zone only able to encompass Blacks as comedians? One might say that to Whites, Black life and problems are not seen as serious. Or it may be something unconscious and less devious. It is doubtless linked to the old stereotypes where Blacks are seen as buffoons and Stepin Fetchits.

CONCLUSION

We have examined the Black middle-class response to *The Cosby Show* and found a mixed view of the show and its impact. The responses are both positive and negative in tone. Yet the interviews indicate a reluctance to be totally negative about one of the few positive portrayals of Blacks on TV. Middle-class Blacks want positive depictions of their lives. Many also want more realistic portrayals. Some feel that these realistic depictions can only be accomplished through a genre other than comedy. For them, to always portray Blacks as comedians makes light of the Black situation and indicates that Black life with all its inherent problems is not taken seriously. Our interviews highlight two significant

aspects of their responses: (a) the fear that the show will render Black problems as irrelevant and (b) the hope and optimism that with continued work, the Black condition can improve.

The negative responses highlight both the ambivalence of the respondents and the fear that the show fosters the false assumption that Black problems have been solved and are no longer relevant. By showing a Black family that for all intents and purposes has fully assimilated, we are led to believe that we are indeed living in an equal opportunity society and with a little hard work and lots of perseverance, anyone can make it. When we meet the Huxtable grandparents, we are shown that they had a difficult life. The grandfather lived in a time of segregated armed forces and segregated music clubs where he was accepted as a musician but not as a person. But he worked hard, and now he has a doctor son, a lawyer daughter-in-law, and grandchildren in college. The overall impression is that the American dream is real for anyone who is willing to play by the rules. We are shown substantial upward mobility in only one generation and led to believe that mobility will be even more pronounced for the Huxtable children because they too are playing by the rules. We are left with the impression that they will not face any barriers or obstacles in their quest for the good life. They are decidedly upper middle class and can only go up—no discrimination or downward mobility for the Huxtables or by extension for Blacks as a group. The positive interviews highlight another significant aspect of the Black middle-class response to *The Cosby Show*: hope or optimism. Although it is true that not all Blacks are living the good life, with prestigious jobs, decent housing and living conditions, and college-bound children, one can always hope for and work toward these things. Just seeing what life like this could be like may be a tremendous motivator. It may inspire hard work and ward off discouragement. One middle-age Black female was articulate on this point:

Like the average woman in society is not blonde and blue-eyed, the average Black family by no means comes close to the Cosby family. But I think what it does, on the other hand, is suggest that there are some Black people and families out there that display those characteristics and qualities. . . . I think that it displays the fact that there

is hope, and even if that's not a predominant condition in society, I think that just by the mere fact that it's on television says to people in this country that you can get there.

Generally, then, the opportunity cost of having positive Black television characters seems to be a lessening of the concern with the Black condition and a fostering of hope that things can get better. This is perhaps the dilemma that fosters the ambivalence in Black middle-class responses to *The Cosby Show*.

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