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ABSTRACT

Of 219 people interviewed within a week of the broadcast of the miniseries "Roots," 104 people were reinterviewed one year later to determine the program's long-term effects, including its perceived and experienced impact on race relations in the United States and its stimulation of viewers to search for their own roots/heritage and to read the book "Roots." Results indicated that respondents tended to attribute long-term positive interracial outcomes to "Roots," feeling that the program improved race relations by providing a keener sense of understanding, knowledge of, and respect for blacks in the United States; few respondents felt that "Roots" worsened race relations. These perceptual and cognitive shifts, however, were not matched by behavioral changes in any of the investigated areas; despite initial expectations, few respondents in the followup had detected any changes in their own behaviors with people of other races; had actively sought to discover their own roots, or had read the book version of "Roots." One explanation for the lack of long-term behavioral changes is that anticipated changes may have been minimized by a communication environment that returned to "normal" after heightened interest in "Roots" waned and that no longer placed a premium on altering one's interactions with people of other races, reading the book, or searching for one's roots.

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"The Routes Not Taken: A Look at the Long Term Impact of 'Roots'"

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ABSTRACT

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This study explored the long term impact of exposure to the television miniseries "Roots." Three specific impact areas are investigated: (1) the perceived and experienced impact on race relations in America, (2) the stimulation of searching for one's own roots/heritage and (3) the stimulation of reading its print counterpart.

A panel design was utilized with respondents interviewed within a week after the miniseries was aired and reinterviewed one year to the month later. A total of 104 people responded to both waves of telephone interviews.

Respondents tended to attribute long term pro-interracial outcomes with "Roots." Most continued to feel the program had improved race relations by providing a keener sense of understanding and knowledge of, and respect for, blacks in America. Few felt "Roots" worsened race relations; almost none experienced such an outcome. Perceptual and cognitive shifts were not matched by behavioral changes in any of the areas investigated. Despite initial expectations, few detected any changes in their own behaviors with people of other races, few actively sought out their own roots, and few turned to the book version of "Roots" following exposure to its television version.

The paper concludes with a delineation of alternative explanations for the lack of long term behavioral changes. Respondent-anticipated changes may have been minimized by a communication environment which, after the program, no longer placed a premium on altering one's interactions with people of other races, reading the book or searching for one's roots.

"The Routes Not Taken: A Look at the Long Term Impact of 'Roots'"

Our nation's eight days with "Roots" was a phenomenon chronicled by media and pollster reports of unprecedented viewership and immediate consequences. An assortment of accounts credited the program with, among others, prompting millions to learn of their lineage, rekindling the nation's interest in its own history; stimulating the sales of a book, rejuvinating a recognition and cry for racial justice and providing the spark that ignited racial disturbances. Given the topic (slavery/interracial relationships), the powerful nature of its presentation, and the public's close attention to the program, the long term outcomes of "Roots" was subject to much speculation and careful consideration. What follows is an attempt to look at selected long term consequences of "Roots," comparing a small sample of respondents, initial reactions to the program with the perceptions and realities of its impact for those people one year later.

Rationale

Media research suggests minimal consequences (changes) subsequent to the airing of entertainment programming. Some regard media programming as reinforcing the status quo since the content itself represents and reflects the mainstream of the society's beliefs and values.¹ Others argue that attitudinal changes are minimized due to selective exposure, perception, and retention factors.² Still others suggest that program messages go unheeded because they are not carefully attended to; in seeking relaxation, media audiences may not tune into a program's informative and persuasive content.³ Finally, there are those who point out that the perceived unreality of media characters and situations limit attitudinal

changes and modeling and imitative behaviors.⁴ Be they operating individually or in conjunction with each other, these content, selectivity, usage, and perceived reality factors are seen as curtailing any change agent function of media entertainment programming.

With "Roots," the limiting factors mentioned above appeared inoperative. First, the program itself was not typical, mainstream Americana. The dramatic, detailed and sympathetic depiction of black life and history was unique on prime time television. Moreover, the message of black determination and dignity, especially in the face of harsh and unhumane conditions, was one not necessarily encountered by many during their formal educational experiences. Second, "Roots" was seen by the largest audience in American television history. Over 130 million Americans reportedly watched at least one episode of the miniseries, with 80 million watching its conclusion. Selective exposure operated only in the sense that people scheduled their activities around each evening's episode. Third, while the program was entertaining, diversion and relaxation were not the only motivations for watching "Roots." Viewers also returned each night because the program provided them with insight and a visual presentation of the history of blacks and slavery in America. Thus, the struggles of the Kinte clan may have been generalized to unnamed thousands of slaves and masters in the 1700s and 1800s. Finally, viewers sympathized with Kunta Kinte and his family, were angry at what happened to them, and felt the clan was representative of slaves during those years. The program was seen as realistic. In short, "Roots" was deliberately viewed by a huge, highly interested and sympathetic audience. These conditions were seen as maximizing the potential for long term impact.

No theoretic rationale guided the selection of particular effects included in the study. Rather, impact areas were selected on the basis of the program itself and media reports of its immediate and/or potential effects. Three areas of impact were explored. First, present day salience of interracial relationships coupled with the program's coverage of the same led to a research emphasis on the perceived and experienced impact of "Roots" on race relations in America. Second, "Roots" placed a value on learning about one's own heritage. Media coverage of the program included accounts of Americans beginning to trace their own roots along with "how to" advice for those becoming so inclined. As such, a section of the research instrument was designed to assess the extent to which "Roots" stimulated similar searches. Finally, the airing of "Roots" on television made the book "Roots" extremely visible and attractive. "Roots" in book form was seen as satisfying the public's seemingly unquenchable interest in the Kinte family. Thus, a third set of items focused on the extent to which exposure to "Roots" on television led to reading its print counterpart.

Method

The first wave of data was collected within a week of the final episode. The sample was selected from the greater Buffalo area using a systematic random sample of phone numbers from the area's telephone directory. A total of 320 interviews were conducted. The second wave of data was collected one year to the month later. Since the research questions focused on long term consequences of exposure to the broadcast, attempts were made to re-interview only those in the initial sample who said they watched "Roots" on television (n=219, 68.4%).



One hundred and four such interviews were conducted, a 47.5% completion rate. There was no response for 30 numbers (13.7%); fourteen numbers (6.4%) were disconnected with no forwarding number provided. Twenty-one of the initial group of respondents (9.6%) refused to be re-interviewed. The remainder (22.8%) either moved, died, or somehow no longer/"never" resided at the number originally contacted at. Obstacles encountered in panel design studies apparently were exacerbated because respondents were identifiable only by their telephone number, sex, age, and education. Thus, in addition to legitimate no answers, "disconnections, refusals and "he/she no longer lives here" responses, an unknown number of potential respondents identified by their sex, age, and education feigned non-recognition or non-existence in order to sidestep the re-interview process.

Of those interviewed during both waves of data collection, 42.3% were males, 52% were under 40 years old, 47.1% had at least some college education. The sample was almost entirely white (97.1%). Those re-interviewed were not markedly different, along any of these demographic attributes, than those interviewed only during wave 1, although they were slightly younger, with proportionately fewer blacks. Those interviewed responded similarly to questions during wave 1 as those not re-interviewed. Thus, while the sample is not representative of the American public or any specific constituency of viewers, it does not appear to be so self-selective as to curtail the validity of this particular over-time investigation.

The initial interview included items assessing exposure to and involvement with "Roots," perceptions of the program's historical representativeness, and perceived cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences of exposure to the broadcast. The follow-up focused on perceived and actual areas of impact. Questions were worded to facilitate comparisons between time 1 and 2 responses.

Both waves of data were collected under the direct supervision of the researcher. Interviewers were undergraduate and graduate students with prior telephone interviewing experience. All were trained for the specifics of their "Roots" assignments and paid for their efforts.

Results

The findings are presented separately for each of the three criterion variables. In each subsection, the specific impact across the entire sample will be presented first. Following that, coverage will focus on four factors potentially influencing responses. First the impact of respondent education, age, and sex will be presented. Second, since uses of a program might affect gratifications obtained/the program's impact, the influence of four (researcher generated) motivations will be examined. Those motivations, which respondents rated during the initial wave of data collection, were: "because the program was entertaining and exciting"; "because I became involved with the family and wanted to know what eventually happened to them"; "to learn about the history of blacks in America"; and "to see what slavery was all about." Third, the impact of the perceived reality of (a) the overall presentation of slavery, and (b) the specific depiction of the Kinte clan will be presented. As indicated earlier, these could be seen as directly related to strength of program consequences. Finally, and regarded as similarly related to impact, is a measure tapping the extent to which respondents empathized with what happened to Kunta Kinte and his descendants.

IMPACT ON RACE RELATIONS

Generalized Impact: In wave 1, respondents were asked whether they thought "Roots" would improve, worsen or have no impact on race relations in America. In wave 2, respondents were asked whether they thought "Roots" had improved, worsened or had no impact on race relations. The modal response at both points in time was enhancement of race relations. Respondents citing improved race relations represented a plurality (40.6%) in wave 1, a small majority (53.4%) in wave 2. Conversely, half as many respondents in wave 2 felt "Roots" worsened race relations as anticipated in wave 1 (13.6% in wave 2, 26.2% in wave 1). More than half of those initially fearing worsened relationships switched to the "improve" (37.0%) or "no impact" (18.5%) positions. Almost no one switched to the "worsened" position. The remaining respondents (12.7% in wave 1, 7.8% in wave 2) were uncertain about the program's impact on race relations. (See Table 1).

Respondents over 40 and those who never attended college were somewhat more likely to indicate the program had improved race relations than their younger and college educated counterparts; these differences were not statistically significant however. There were no discernable differences on the basis of respondent sex. Those who watched the program with a strong information orientation (strongly motivated by "to learn about the history of blacks in America" and "to see what slavery was all about") significantly more frequently felt the program improved race relations. Strength of entertainment-oriented motivations ("because the program was entertaining and exciting" and "because I became involved with the family and wanted to know what eventually happened to them") did not affect these responses. Measures assessing the perceived reality of the presentation and representativeness of the Kinte clan generally were unrelated to the type of impact respondents ascribed to the program. While not statistically significant, the more one felt "Roots" realistically portrayed what life was like for blacks and slaves in the 1700s and 1800s or felt Kunta Kinte and his family were typical slaves, the more frequently one mentioned that "Roots" improved race relations.

Those who felt the program affected race relations in America were asked to specify the way or ways in which such relations had changed. Most (78%) indicated that "Roots" raised white consciousness and understanding of blacks. Relatively few spontaneously suggested that the program exacerbated race relations by stirring up black (16.9%) or white (1.7%) anger or hatred. (See Table 2) All respondents then were read a "short list of effects of 'Roots'

others have mentioned" and asked, for each effect, whether they agreed or disagreed it happened because of the program. These items were seen as an elaboration of the feelings already ascertained. While a third (34.6%) agreed with the statement that "Roots raised up anger among blacks," only one in twenty (5.8%) agreed that "Roots" "caused racial violence." On the other hand, there was near unanimity with the statements that "Roots" "increased our knowledge of black and American history," and "raised black self-respect" (91.3% and 87.5% respectively). Nearly three in four (69.9%) felt the program "raised the respect for blacks among whites." (see Table 3)

Responses to the researcher-generated items were not a function of respondent age, education or sex. Responses were a function of strength of the assessed motivations for watching "Roots." None of the motivations significantly affected responses to all of the items measured. Nonetheless, there appeared to be a relationship between strength of motivations and agreement with the effect mentioned by the interviewer. For example, those viewing the program with a deep interest in seeing what slavery was all about more frequently agreed with the statements ["Roots"] "increased our knowledge of black and American history," "raised the respect of blacks among whites," and "helped dispell myths about blacks and slavery." The perceived reality of the program's depiction of life for blacks and slaves during the period was similarly related to agreement with the effects items; the more realistic "Roots" was seen to be, the more likely the respondent was to agree with the pre-interracial effects statement. The other realism and involvement measures were unrelated to these perceived effects responses.

In general, these specifics corroborate the perceptions assessed with the initial perceived impact question; "Roots" was widely seen as exerting a multi-faceted positive influence on race relations in America.

Impact on Self: On a cognitive dimension, "Roots" provided a lasting sense of understanding of (a) the treatment slaves endured, and (b) black interest in their own roots. When asked the extent to which "Roots" gave the respondent a better understanding of the injustice slavery was for blacks, 72.1% in wave 1 either said "somewhat" or "much better"; 77.4% in wave 2 offered those responses. When asked the extent to which "Roots" provided a better understanding of why blacks in America were interested in their African roots, 88.7% on wave 1 said "somewhat" or "much better"; the corresponding wave 2 figure was 81.3%. (See Table 4)

Of the four viewing motivations assessed, only one ("because the program was entertaining and exciting") was unrelated to these specific cognitive outcomes. Statistically significant positive relationships existed between motivations and understanding of the injustices of slavery and interest among blacks now in their African heritage. The demographic, perceived reality, and involvement variables exerted no effect on responses to these items.

These responses suggest that "Roots" facilitated a long term sense of understanding about a segment of black history and present day needs.

On a behavioral dimension, wave 2 respondents were asked whether "Roots" had any actual impact on their own interactions with people of other races. Less than one in four (23.1%) responded affirmatively; 75% said the program had no bearing on such behaviors. There were no statistically significant education, age or sex differences for this response; those under 40 and those who never attended college were slightly more likely to acknowledge the program's impact on their own interracial behavioral patterns. Strength of information orientation appeared to influence respondent behaviors; those who indicated that "Roots" had an impact on their behaviors with people of other races were significantly more likely to have been strongly motivated by a desire to learn about the history of blacks in America and see what slavery was all about. Strength of entertainment motivations varied directly with acknowledgement of behavioral impact although differences were not statistically significant. Those who perceived the program and family as realistic and representative were somewhat, although not statistically significantly, more likely to say they changed their interracial behaviors because of "Roots." Anger at the treatment Kinte and his family received was significantly related to impact; those whose behaviors were changed were twice as likely to have indicated the treatment given to the Kinte clan made them feel "very angry."

Those acknowledging behavioral changes were asked an open-ended follow-up assessing the specifics of those changes. Very few overt changes were reported. Instead, respondents tended to mention attitudinal differences, although such changes may have behavioral manifestations. "Respect and understanding" was the most frequently mentioned "behavioral" change. Table 5 provides the complete set of responses.

On the whole, fears about "Roots" exerting a negative influence on race relations seem unwarranted. Few in this sample felt the program worsened race relations; almost none actually experienced such an outcome. On the other hand, while respondents tended to link "Roots" with a variety of benign/positive racial outcomes, only a relative handful reported changes in their own interracial behaviors. At least for this sample, the observable impact of "Roots" on race relations was minimal.

SEARCH FOR ONE'S PAST

A majority of respondents in wave 1 said "Roots" stimulated their interest in their own heritage; one in five was "much more interested" following exposure to the show. Despite this apparent surge of interest, few followed through. In wave 2, when asked about searching for their own roots ("either by asking other people, going to record books, or things like that"), only 16.8% said they had. Of those, slightly more were over 40. Search was not at all related to respondent education, sex, or motivations for watching the program. Interestingly, while those who subsequently sought their own roots were slightly more angry at the treatment given to Kunte Kinte and his family, they were significantly less likely to see "Roots" as realistically portraying life for blacks and slaves during the period covered.

Responses to the follow-up assessing how the searches were undertaken suggested a less than thorough approach to the activity. While one person hired an investigator and most (15 of 17) spoke to relatives, only a third went to any family documents. No one either went to a library or wrote any letters related to their search.

For these respondents, "Roots" triggered an interest but not a massive search for one's past. Most of the sample (61.5%) felt no more informed about their own roots one year after the program than they did before "Roots" was aired. (See Table 6)

SIMULATION OF READING

Wave 1 data suggest that exposure to "Roots" would stimulate reading of the book from which the program was based. Among those who hadn't already read the book (74.2% of the sample), nearly half (45.7%) expressed substantial interest in reading it after seeing "Roots" on TV; an additional 14.9% expressed moderate interest. Moreover, more than half (57.9%) said they expected to

read the book. One year later, only 4 more respondents had read "Roots." Given the rarity of program related reading, no breakdowns of such readers were undertaken.

What happened? Why didn't those who expected to read "Roots" read it?

Reasons for not reading varied, but tended to center around time limitations and lack of interest. Nearly half (43%) claimed they just didn't have the time to read the book. One in four (24.7%) wasn't interested; 23.7% felt that watching "Roots" on television was enough. Several respondents said they couldn't afford to purchase the book. For whatever reasons or post-hoc rationalizations, exposure to the televised version of "Roots" generally did not activate this sample into reading its full length written counterpart.

Discussion

Respondents tended to attribute long term pro-interracial outcomes with "Roots." Most of those interviewed continued to feel a keener sense of understanding about blacks in America because of the program. Moreover, most felt "Roots" improved race relations by increasing knowledge/dispelling myths about blacks and slavery and raising white and black respect for blacks. The longevity of the perceptions and cognitive changes reported may be of social and scientific significance. These shifts may reflect a deep-seated change in the way Americans cognitively map blacks. One outcome of this may be more open, flexible, and ultimately meaningful interracial interactions. The results also suggest the media capable of stimulating long term as well as transitory, and central as well as superficial belief system changes. The media's input in any re-socialization process may be more meaningful than typically thought of.

Perceptual and cognitive shifts were not matched by behavioral changes in any of the three areas investigated. Despite respondent expectations following exposure to "Roots", the program's behavioral impact on those surveyed appeared to be minimal. While most said "Roots" affected race relationships, few detected any changes in their own behaviors with people of other races. While most claimed "Roots" stimulated an interest in their own roots, few actively sought out such information. While most intended to read "Roots," almost none did so following exposure to the program.

Why was the behavioral impact minimal? One explanation can be called the excuse approach. That is, despite the best of intentions, respondents were unable to carry through because of extenuating circumstances. Thus, respondents

reported few behavioral changes because many may not have had the opportunity to demonstrate new interracial behaviors, couldn't find the time and/or money to search for their own roots or read "Roots" in hardcover form.

An alternative explanation is that mass media programs generally exert minimal long term and/or behavioral influence. While excitement is stimulated and emotions are moved, media presentations may be relatively ineffective vehicles of change because program messages are not tailored to, received or given credence by audience members whose predispositions are strong enough to neutralize motivation, perceived reality and involvement factors. Individuals are unmoved but see others as more susceptible to media influence. Thus, effects are accorded to others but not to self. The paucity of behavioral changes reported could be interpreted as supporting this obstinate audience/null effects school of thought. The impact of viewer motivations and perceptions of the content and its context provides additional support in this perspective; the active viewer influenced the outcome of exposure to media fare.

A third explanation falls between the two described above. Here, effects are seen as dependent on the on-going communication environment encompassing each individual. Change then would be a function of the extent to which the communication environment surrounding a program facilitated or inhibited its impact. Thus, while episodes one through eight were aired and viewed, media and interpersonal communications fostered a climate where cognitive, affective and behavioral changes were possible, acceptable. Later, as the winter wore on and discussions returned to "normal," continued affirmation of initial reactions, in the form of behaviors, was uncalled for and/or unneeded. What seemed crucial during the dominance of "Roots" became relatively unimportant when "Roots" was no longer the object of much attention. Lack of time and interest could be reflective of a changed environment which no longer places a premium on, in this case, reading the book or searching for one's roots. Differences across respondents would be attributed to different communication environments; those that moved could have been in communication environments which placed "Roots" in a central position for a period of time long enough to evoke changes.

Given the third explanation provided above, it may be that the long term behavioral consequences of exposure to "Roots" have yet to be felt. When "Roots" is repeated and its sequel aired, the communication environment may change again, stimulating the behaviors anticipated one year ago. Time and further investigations can document this possibility.

Table 1. Perceived Impact on Race Relations: General Overview

Impact	Wave 1	Wave 2
Improve race relations	40.6%	53.4%
Worsen race relations	26.2%	13.6%
No impact on race relations	20.4%	25.2%
Uncertain about impact	12.7%	7.8%

	Wave 2			
	Improve	Worsen	No Impact	Uncertain
Improve	71.4%	2.4%	16.7%	9.5%
Worsen	37.0%	40.7%	18.5%	3.7%
Wave 1 No impact	42.9%	9.5%	42.9%	4.8%
Uncertain	50.0%	0.0%	33.3%	16.7%

Table 2. Perceived Impact on Race Relations:
Spontaneously Generated Responses*

Effect	
Raised white consciousness and understanding of blacks; helped dispell myths	78.0%
Increased knowledge of black and American history	27.1%
Raised white respect for blacks	18.6%
Stirred up black anger & bitterness	16.9%
Increased sympathy for black rights	10.2%
Raised black self-respect	6.8%
Stirred up white anger & prejudice	1.7%

*assessed only among respondents who believed the program had an impact on race relations

Table 3. Perceived Impact on Race Relations: Responses to Specific Effects

Effect	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
Caused racial violence	5.8%	90.3%	3.9%
Raised black self-respect	87.5%	8.7%	3.8%
Helped dispell myths about blacks & slavery	74.0%	20.2%	5.8%
Stirred up anger among blacks	34.6%	57.7%	7.7%
Raised the respect of blacks among whites	69.9%	25.2%	4.9%
Increased our knowledge of black & American history	91.3%	6.7%	1.9%

Table 4. Reported Cognitive Changes Experienced by the Respondent

Item	Wave 1	Wave 2
Extent to which "Roots" gave respondent a better understanding of the injustice slavery was for blacks:		
Much better understanding	30.8%	38.2%
Somewhat better understanding	41.3%	39.2%
Not much better understanding	16.3%	12.2%
No better understanding	11.5%	10.3%
Extent to which "Roots" gave respondent a better understanding of why blacks in America are interested in their African roots:		
Much better understanding	42.3%	34.4%
Somewhat better understanding	46.4%	46.9%
Not much better understanding	6.2%	10.3%
No better understanding	5.2%	8.4%

Table 5. Reported Interracial Behavioral Changes

	Number of Respondents Mentioning Each Change
Increased respect, understanding and awareness of black history, heritage, and culture	15
More tolerant treatment of blacks	5
Went out of way to be kind or correct; previous wrongs	2
More religious	1
Stopped calling blacks names	1
Got involved in some racial violence	1

Table 6. Interest and Knowledge About One's Own Roots Triggered by Exposure to "Roots"

	Wave 1	Wave 2
Extent to which "Roots" made respondent more interested in own roots:		
much more interested	19.8%	
somewhat more interested	42.6%	
not much more interested	16.8%	
no more interested	20.8%	
Perceived level of informedness about one's own roots when compared with before "Roots" aired the previous year:		
now much more informed		4.8%
now somewhat more informed		16.3%
now not much more informed		17.3%
now no more informed		61.5%

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¹Reflective of this is Gerbner and Gross' cultivation analysis and Cultivation index. See George Gerbner and Larry R. Gross, "Living with Television: The Violence Profile," Journal of Communication, Vol. 26, 1976, pp. 172-199.

²Characteristic of this perspective applied to entertainment programs is the work on "All in the Family." See, for example, Neal Vidmar and Milton Rokeach, "Archie Bunker's Bigotry: A Study in Selective Perception and Exposure," Journal of Communication, Vol. 24, 1974, pp. 36-47. Also see Stuart H. Surlin, "Five Years of 'All in the Family,' Stimulus and Response: A Summary of Empirical Research Generated by the Program," presented to the Speech Communication Association, Houston, Texas, 1975.

³The "uses and gratifications" approach to media effects received extensive coverage and commentary in The Uses of Mass Communication: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research, edited by Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz, Beverly Hills, Sage, 1974.

⁴Byron Reeves provides a theoretic overview of this approach in an unpublished paper, "The Perceived Reality of Television and Children Limitation of TV Models," Michigan State University, 1975.