Stereotype or Success?
Prime-Time Television’s Portrayals of Gay Male, Lesbian, and Bisexual Characters

Amber B. Raley, BA
Jennifer L. Lucas, PhD
Agnes Scott College

ABSTRACT. The current content analysis of prime-time network television during the fall of 2001 seeks to identify the representation of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters in shows known to have one re-occurring homosexual character based on the theories of Clark and Berry. Clark (1969) established four stages of media representation for minority groups: non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect. The findings of the study support the premise that Gay males and Lesbians have passed Clark’s stage of non-representation and have progressed into the stage of ridicule and some are moving into the stages of regulation and respect. Berry (1980) devised three periods based on the television portrayal of Blacks: The Stereotypic Age, The New Awareness, and Stabilization. Results were mixed, with only a partial support of the hypothesis that Gay males and Lesbians had advanced beyond The Stereotypic Age.

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Amber B. Raley is a recent graduate of Agnes Scott College. Jennifer L. Lucas is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Agnes Scott College. Correspondence may be addressed: Jennifer Lucas, Department of Psychology, 141 E. College Avenue, Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA 30030.
A growing number of television (TV) programs feature homosexual characters. Many of these shows are aired during prime-time when American viewing levels are typically the highest (Shapiro, n.d.). Recent programs include The Hughleys and Friends (Lavender Tube, 2001a). A few prime-time TV programs such as Will & Grace and The Ellen Show have adopted Gay male and Lesbian leads (Lavender Tube, 2001a,c).

The Consumer Electronics Association (CEA, 2001) report on TV industry trends and buying habits identified 98% of households in the United States as owning at least one TV set and state that the average household owns 2.5 TVs. The average American spends 12 hours per week watching TV (Robinson & Skill, 1993). In addition, Americans prefer to spend the majority of their leisure time watching TV (Huston et al., 1992a). Research has found that people watch TV for entertainment and to acquire information (Huston et al.). The pervasiveness of TV as a medium makes it a viable subject for research on the way a group is portrayed in the mass media at large. The representation of minority groups is of particular interest because these groups are often marginalized in society.

Past research has used content analysis to examine and record the content of media such as magazines, newspapers, radio, and TV to monitor the portrayals of minority groups including Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and women (Huston et al., 1992c; Lindsey, 2002). However, little research has been devoted earlier to content analyzing the representation of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters. The intent of this research is to fill the gap and document the status of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual character portrayals on TV. Research of this nature will begin an important history of content analysis on a group in the early stages of representation.

The mass media are a powerful tool that societies can use to create and proliferate the values, assumptions, and stereotypes of their society to the populace (Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Gross, 1991, 1994, 1996; Hall, n.d.; Hantzis & Lehr, 1994; Huston et al., 1992a,b; Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992; Kylo-Patrick, 2000). The influential effects of mass media including TV are not a recent discovery. TV has been used since its inception as a tool of propaganda in times of both peace and war.
Through their “Cultural Indicators” project Gerbner, and various colleagues (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002) have proposed that TV is the most universal mass medium in the history of American culture and as such, has tremendous power to affect the ways people think and behave. TV is the dominant source of information for the majority of Americans and the messages it relays either directly or in the guise of entertainment, serve to create, confirm, and cultivate TV viewpoints and values in the TV audience (Gerbner et al., 1980, 2002). Furthermore, when TV depictions are perceived by the viewer as similar to their standard everyday reality, the TV message is amplified, creating a more powerful and influential suggestion (Gerbner et al., 1980, 2002).

Researchers have pointed to a “mainstreaming effect” of the media, particularly among the heavy viewers of TV (Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Gerbner et al., 1980, 2002; Gross, 1991, 1994, 1996). According to Gross and Gerbner et al., people who watch TV for longer periods of time are more likely to give a stereotypical, “television answer” than light TV viewers of their same demographic background. Additionally, people of disparate demographic backgrounds are more likely to give the same stereotypical “television answer” if they are heavy watchers of TV (Gerbner et al., 1980; Gross, 1994). This research shows the ability of TV to influence the opinions of individuals regardless of their demographic membership. This “mainstreaming effect” is considered responsible for the uniformity of opinions among what would otherwise be a diverse group of people (Gerbner et al., 1980; Gross, 1994).

Similarly, Clark (1972) stated that the specific values communicated by mass media about particular social groups come from recognition, the identification of a person as belonging to a particular social group by recognizing them as such through the assignment of attention, and respect—the positive portrayal of a member of a particular social group (as cited in Huston, et al., 1992b). When TV fails to show characters of a particular social group or portrays them in a negative and/or stereotypical fashion then that social group is being denied recognition or respect. Because mass media is a primary source of information, without recognition and respect on TV and other forms of mass media, social groups are more likely to be devalued by society.

Minority social groups such as Blacks and other ethnic and racial minorities as well as Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals are disproportionately negatively affected by the absence of recognition and respect on TV. The average consumer of mass media may have limited first-hand knowledge or contact with these groups because of their minority
status. Therefore, the primary channel of information about the real life of these minority groups comes from the fictional portrayals of these minorities as characters on TV programs (Gross, 1991, 1994, Gross & Woods, 1999; Huston, 1992; Kielwasser, 1992; Hart, 2000).

While the debate still wages about how and when someone “becomes” Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual, research indicates individuals usually “come out” around adolescence (Gross, 1991, 1996; Parkerson, 1993). Although researchers generally agree that family and peers are more influential than mass media in the identity formulation of children, this may not apply as perfectly to adolescents who have identified themselves as Gay males, Lesbians, or Bisexuals because they most likely do not have an “out” model of Gay male, Lesbian, or Bisexual behavior as a member of their family or peer group (Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Gross, 1991). Because of the lack of first-hand contact with others who are Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual, youths who are beginning to formulate their identity as Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual are more likely than other individuals, including other minorities, to turn to the mass media for information about how they should present themselves. On TV and other forms of mass media they can find stereotypical portrayals of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters on which they model their self-concept and behavior, further perpetuating these stereotypes, many of which are negative (Dyer, 1999; Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Gross, 1991, 1996; Gross & Woods, 1999; Huston, 1992; Kielwasser, 1992). Much of the identity formation of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual youths is being learned from heterosexist and homophobic sources of misinformation on TV.

The history of the representation of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters on TV has been compared with that of other ethnic and racial minority groups (Barton, 2001; Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Moritz, 1994, 1999; Parkerson, 1993) as well as women. Although this comparison is useful in some instances, it denies one striking difference between the groups. Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals often cannot be immediately recognized as a member of a minority group based on identifying physical features like skin color.

The current research aims to determine if Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals on prime-time television have followed the stages and periods established for other minorities. Clark (1969) established four stages of representation in the media for minority social groups. Berry (1980) developed three periods of representation based on the portrayal of Blacks on TV. The representation of Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals on prime-time television will be measured using Clark’s stages and Berry’s periods.
Clark’s scheme progresses from non-representation to ridicule, regulation, and finally, respect. He defines non-representation as outright exclusion from the media. The next stage is ridicule; here formerly non-recognized groups are shown on TV, but only as objects of derisive humor. Clark notes that the group feels better because they are not being ignored, but at the same time the ridicule lowers their self-esteem. Clark defined the third stage of regulation as when the minority group is represented but in limited, socially acceptable roles. During the fourth stage, called respect, the members of the minority group are presented in both positive and negative roles of everyday life including interacting with children and having romantic relationships.

Another framework for minority representation was developed by Berry (1980) to assess the portrayal of Blacks on TV. Berry identifies three periods—The Stereotypic Age, The New Awareness, and Stabilization: The Settled Phase. The Stereotypic Age spans from 1948-1965 for Blacks on TV and is characterized by the appearance of Blacks in stereotypical roles such as the “Mammy” in the character of “Beulah” and the “Humorous Entertainer” seen on *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (Berry). The New Awareness from 1965 to 1972 featured Blacks in shows such as *I Spy, Star Trek, Mission Impossible,* and *Room 222* as supporting cast members and some leads with overwhelmingly positive qualities in what seems to be an effort to recompense for past stereotypes (Berry). Berry’s (1980) third period, Stabilization: The Settled Phase, begins in 1972 and ends with the conclusion of his study in 1980. This stage is marked by a slight continuous decrease in portrayals of Blacks along with a movement toward more realistic characters and increased attention to individual characters and their problems on programs featuring primarily Black casts. Examples of shows from this period included *The Jeffersons, Good Times,* and *Sanford and Son* (Berry).

Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals were not shown on TV until the early 1960s, except in highly coded language, largely due to the influence of the motion picture production code which explicitly prohibited Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals from being shown (Gross & Woods, 1999). From the 1960s to the present, Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals have been stereotypically portrayed as funny clowns, flaming queers, queens, fairies, fags and flits; villainous criminals, mental patients, child molesters, and vampires; or victims of violence, HIV/AIDS, and gender/sexual identity disorder (Barton, 2001; Bux, n.d.; Dyer, 1999; Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation [GLAAD], 1991; Gross, 1991, 1994, 1996; Gross & Woods, 1999; Hantzis & Lehr, 1994; Huston, 1992b; Kielwasser, 1992; Hart, 2000; Moritz, 1994, 1999; Sarten, 1998;
Sheldon, 1999; Weiss, 1992a,b,d). Some more recent (since the 1990s) depictions of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters have been more positive; however, many stereotypes still linger on prime-time TV and continue to proliferate in the minds of TV viewers.

If Gay male and Lesbian characters are shown on TV this will indicate that they have surpassed Clark’s stage one of non-representation. To document the representational inequity, the number of prime-time TV programs with Gay male and Lesbian characters will be compared with the number of shows without. Previous research indicates that the portrayal of Gay male and Lesbian TV characters is not equivalent to the number of Gay males and Lesbians in the population (Hantzis & Lehr, 1994).

Non-representation will also be tested by determining the number of Bisexual characters on TV. Researchers have suggested that Bisexual characters are rarely depicted because their “confusion” about their sexual orientation presents a problem when attempting to classify their character (Sender, 1999; Sender et al., 1998). The current research predicts that there will be few to no characters that are identified as Bisexual.

If Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters have made the move into Clark’s stage two of social group representation, they will be shown as the subject of ridicule; since the earliest representations of Gay male characters, humorous iconography such as a swishy walk was used to identify a character as Gay (Dyer, 1999; Sender et al., 1998).

Comedy programs have often made fun of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters through Gay-themed jokes and stereotypes such as the effeminate male and the butch female, (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). GLAAD (1991) specifies that the use of stereotypes to ridicule Lesbians is vicious and unrelenting. In the same way the blackface minstrel shows ridiculed Blacks, the current TV comedies allow Gay male and Lesbian characters to be funny by ridiculing them. Gay males and Lesbians on situational comedies are seen as jokesters and jesters whose funny antics make them an ideal target for ridicule. The Gay-themed jokes on these comedies can be hurtful homophobic jokes that perpetuate negative stereotypes (Hart, 2000). On the current situation comedy, Will & Grace, Sean P. Hayes’s character, Jack, is an example of the over-the-top stereotype of a flamboyant Gay male who receives the brunt of the laughs as the butt of the joke (Sarten, 1998). The continuous connection of laughter to the character sets him up to be no more than the show’s comic relief jester.

For Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters to be in Clark’s stage four, respect, they will need to be seen in diverse roles that go beyond the
socially acceptable stereotypes. The current study focuses on the propensity of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters to interact with children and have romantic relationships. These two activities are commonly observed on TV by heterosexual characters and defy the “comfortable” stereotypical roles associated with Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals. Additionally, the rights to adopt and raise children and the legitimization of romantic relationships have been two prominent issues within the Gay community. Without these symbols indicating that they have achieved the stage of respect, Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters will be considered to be still in stage three of regulation, with roles limited to a few stereotypes. One of the stereotypes that GLAAD (1991) has identified as perpetuating harmful myths about Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals is the premise that they are incapable of having children. Another long-standing stereotype that has not completely faded is the misidentification of Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals as child molesters or “perverts.”

Several researchers have indicated that Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters are unable to express their sexuality on screen through romantic relationships because sexual images of Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals are threatening to heterosexual audiences that consider displays of affection “flaunting” sexual orientation (Bruni, 1999; Gross, 1994, 1996; Hantzis & Lehr, 1994). Many Gay rights activists note that allowing respectable Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual TV characters the opportunity to express their romantic feelings in the same manner as heterosexual characters (i.e., kissing) is an important step on the road to a more complete acceptance of Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals not only on TV, but in the general public as well (Bruni, 1999). Unmarried heterosexual characters on prime-time TV are often shown engaging in displays of affection including kissing and sexual behavior (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). The Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters are often not allowed any connection to the Gay community, much less the intimate relationship of a partner (Bux, n.d). Even when a partner or lover is present, their interaction is limited to a passionless embrace, a hug, or a consoling touch (Moritz, 1994, 1999).

Previous research has made note that the Gay male character on the popular prime-time show Melrose Place was the only member of the cast that was not shown having a sexual relationship during the five-year run of the show (Gross & Woods, 1999). A case study of the first re-occurring central Lesbian character on prime-time TV, Marilyn of Heartbeat, notes that Marilyn’s relationship with Patti, her partner, is entirely asexual despite the overt sexual escapades of the heterosexual characters.
As one researcher concisely put it, “The positive portrayal of any physically romantic or sexual interaction between Gay or Lesbian characters . . . as generally been exorcised from programming content” (Bux, 17).

The stereotypical portrayal of Gay males and Lesbians would place them in Berry’s Stereotypic Age. Berry’s second period, The New Awareness, would require that Gay male and Lesbian characters be shown in supporting and leading roles where their positive attributes are highlighted. Berry’s third and final period, Stabilization, would be evidenced by shows consisting primarily of Gay male and Lesbian characters in the same way as Berry noted that shows such as Good Times contained almost exclusively Black characters. Additionally, programs during the Stabilization period would tend to be more realistic portrayals of the personal problems facing Gay male and Lesbian characters.

The intent of the current research is to survey, through content analysis, the portrayal of Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals on prime-time TV in the fall of 2001. The current sample will be tested according to Clark’s four stages as well as Berry’s three periods.

To see if Gay male and Lesbian characters were represented by the first stage of Clark’s (1969) theory of media representation of social groups, the number of prime-time TV programs with Gay male and Lesbian characters will be noted. Additionally, to assess the extent of representation inequality the number of these shows will be compared with the number of TV programs without Gay male and Lesbian characters. Also to test Clark’s first stage of non-representation, the number of characters identified as Bisexual will be evaluated to see if just this subgroup is being excluded in TV programming. Clark’s second stage of ridicule will be evaluated by determining if Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters are the subjects of ridicule by heterosexual characters through the use of jokes with Gay themes. Finally, to test Clark’s stages three and four, regulation and respect, Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters’ interactions with children and their romantic relationships with each other will be evaluated.

Berry’s three periods of representation for Blacks will be applied to the current sample of Gay males and Lesbians to assess their portrayal on prime-time TV. To test Berry’s first period, The Stereotypic Age, the stereotypes of the Gay male or Lesbian will be studied. Gay males and Lesbians shown in serious, non-comedy roles, interacting with children and engaging in romantic displays of affection will be violating common and comfortable stereotypes. Therefore, characters exhibiting these traits will have surpassed Berry’s first period.
The presence of numerous Gay male and Lesbian characters in supporting parts as well as some leading roles would place them in Berry’s second period. The New Awareness of Gay males and Lesbians would elevate them from prior stereotypes such as the wacky queer comic and the sexual predator and into positive portrayals where they are shown as serious adults trusted in the presence of children.

Stabilization, Berry’s third period would consist of pure Gay male and Lesbian programming. For a show to be categorized in Berry’s third period, the cast would consist almost exclusively of Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals and the primary focus of each episode would be on the realistic and specific individual concerns of those characters. Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters will be analyzed using both Clark’s four stages and Berry’s three periods.

**METHODS**

**Materials**

Videotapes were used to record five episodes of nine prime-time TV shows. Ten dramas and comedies were originally chosen based on the knowledge that they had at least one recurring Gay male, Lesbian, or Bisexual character, with recurring character defined by Wyatt (2001) as a character who has appeared in three or more episodes of the show. The Lavender Tube (2001a,b,c), a weekly online TV guide of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual shows was used as a resource to determine which current prime-time TV shows had a known Gay male, Lesbian, or Bisexual character. For a brief explanation of why each show was chosen see Appendix A. One of the shows that was originally chosen had to be dropped because it premiered too late in the season for five episodes to be recorded. Because pay cable channels such as Home Box Office (HBO) and Cinemax are held to different standards, the current research limited the stations from which the prime-time TV shows were selected to network TV. The networks were American Broadcasting Companies, Inc. (ABC), Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), Fox Broadcasting Company (FOX), National Broadcasting Company (NBC), Universal Paramount Network (UPN), and Warner Brothers (WB). For a complete list of shows and their respective networks, timeslots, and day of week aired see Appendix B. Consistent with previous content analysis of minorities, only comedy and drama programs were evaluated (Berry, 1980; Segger et al., 1981).
Procedure

The nine prime-time shows were videotaped over the span of approximately six weeks during the fall 2001 TV season until five episodes of each show had been recorded. The shows were content analyzed for a number of variables related to the characters. The variables included the gender, race, sexual orientation of the recorded characters, the number of jokes with homosexual themes said by the characters, the number of times the character engaged in a display of affection with another character, and whether the character interacted with children. In order to code the data as objectively as possible, these variables were operationally defined before the taped shows were watched. Additionally, all shows were recorded before any data analysis took place. Gender and race were based on the visible characteristics of the characters, and it was assumed that, unless otherwise specified, a character was heterosexual. Displays of affection were coded as holding hands, hugging/embracing, kissing, shown in bed together with no implication of sex, and shown in bed together or other occasion where sex implied. The researchers created this scale in the absence of any similar scale. To be coded as interacting with children, the character could touch, speak to or about a child who was present in the scene, or look at a child where a child is anyone perceived to be younger than an adolescent (less than 13 years old).

RESULTS

The sample consisted of 62 characters from eight prime-time TV shows. Will & Grace featured the fewest number of re-occurring characters, five, while ER had the most with 12. Of the 62 total characters 32 were male (31.6%) and 30 were female (48.4%). Nine of the characters were African American (14.5%), one was Asian/Pacific Islander (1.6%), and 52 were White (83.9%). Nine of the characters observed were identified as a Gay male, Lesbian, or Bisexual (17.3%). Of these five were Lesbian (9.6%, 55.6%) and four were Gay males (7.7%, 44.4%). Although one character had been identified as Bisexual on the show Friends, she was never shown on screen or even mentioned during the episodes taped. Therefore, there were no observations made of characters identified as Bisexual.

The presence of Gay male and Lesbian characters during prime-time TV indicates that they have achieved the first stage of Clark’s (1969) scale. To further analyze the representation inequality, the number of
prime-time TV programs with Gay male and Lesbian characters was compared with the number of TV programs without Gay male and Lesbian characters. Eighty dramas and comedies were listed in the fall TV schedule and six (7.5%) of those shows had at least one recurring Gay male or Lesbian character observed. This showed that Gay males and Lesbians are receiving only minor representation on prime-time TV.

Also to test Clark’s (1969) first stage of non-representation, the number of Bisexual characters was evaluated. Although *Friends* was taped because a re-occurring Bisexual character was known to exist on the show, the character was not observed during the recorded sample. None of the characters observed identified themselves as Bisexual, which indicated that Bisexual characters are still in the first stage of non-representation for the sample used. However, the knowledge that a Bisexual character was known to exist in the past shows that movement along Clark’s stages may be in both directions of representation, not merely a steady incline into more acceptability. Since none of the characters analyzed was identified as Bisexual, that terminology will hereafter be dropped from descriptions of the current research.

Clark’s (1969) second stage of ridicule was evaluated by determining if Gay male and Lesbian characters were the subjects of ridicule by heterosexual characters through the use of jokes with Gay themes. A total of 84 jokes with Gay themes was observed. Fifty-five jokes (65.5%) were told by the Gay male and Lesbian characters and 29 jokes (34.5%) were told by the heterosexual characters. Gay male and Lesbian characters are the subjects of ridicule, but more frequently by their own jokes with Gay themes rather than jokes made by heterosexual characters. An independent *t*-test indicated that there was a significant difference *

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t(308) = -4.23, \ p \leq .001
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between the mean number of Gay jokes told by heterosexual characters versus Gay male and Lesbian characters with Gay male and Lesbian characters telling, on average, more jokes with Gay themes (\(M = 1.20, SD = 1.73\)) than heterosexual characters (\(M = 0.11, SD = 0.37\)). This lends some support to the notion that Gay male and Lesbian characters may be represented by the Clark’s second stage of ridicule.

Finally, to test Clark’s (1969) stages three and four of regulation and respect, Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters’ interactions with children and their romantic relationships with each other were evaluated. The heterosexual characters did not interact with children more than the Gay male and Lesbian characters (\(X^2 = .001, p = .97\)) and significant differences \([t(308) = -.005, p = .99]\) were not found between the number of displays of affection shown by heterosexual characters versus Gay
male and Lesbian characters. Of the 22 displays of affection exhibited by Gay male and Lesbian characters, eight (36.4%) were in the category “hug/embrace,” six (27.3%) were labeled “shown in bed together, no sex implied,” four (18.2%) were “holding hands,” and four (18.2%) were a “kiss” although none of these affectionate displays was necessarily with a partner or even someone of their same gender. Comparatively, characters identified as heterosexual had a total of 123 displays of affection; 54 (43.9%) were a “kiss,” 49 (39.8%) were a “hug/embrace,” 15 (12.2%) were “holding hands,” and 5 (4.1%) were “shown in bed together, sex implied.” This provides evidence that Gay male and Lesbian characters are moving into Clark’s third stage of regulation and possibly even the fourth stage of respect.

Berry’s (1980) three periods were tested against the current sample of Gay males and Lesbians to assess their portrayal on prime-time TV. While some Gay males and Lesbians were shown in serious, non-comedy roles, interacting with children and engaging in romantic displays of affection others were still portrayed in stereotypical roles, placing them in Berry’s Stereotypic Age. Jack from Will & Grace is first and foremost a jester, even though he does display some serious moments, particularly in interacting with his son. Additionally, even though some Gay male and Lesbian stereotypes were ignored, others, such as the reluctance to show Gay males and Lesbians in sexual relationships, lingered. Therefore, some characters and shows could be said to have surpassed Berry’s first period while others are still stuck portraying Gay male and Lesbian stereotypes.

The presence of numerous Gay male and Lesbian characters in supporting parts as well as some leading roles would indicate placement in The New Awareness, Berry’s (1980) second period. Of the nine Gay male and Lesbian characters observed, all but one (89%) could be classified as a supporting or leading role. However, the existence of nine Gay male and Lesbian characters (17.3%) out of 62 characters on shows chosen specifically for the fact that they had a re-occurring Gay male or Lesbian character could hardly be classified as numerous.

Unlike the portrayal of Blacks on prime-time TV, Gay males and Lesbians are yet to achieve Stabilization, Berry’s third period. None of the shows sampled had more than two primary characters who were Gay males or Lesbians. Will & Grace had the highest percentage of Gay male and Lesbian characters, with two (40%) of the five primary re-occurring characters identified as Gay males. Although issues unique to Gay males and Lesbians show up from time to time, they are not the sole focus of any of the programs sampled.
DISCUSSION

Gay male and Lesbian characters were represented in 7.5% of the dramas and comedies in the fall TV schedule. This indicates that Gay males and Lesbians are receiving some representation in TV programs and that they have passed Clark’s (1969) first stage of non-representation. Although a Bisexual character was known to exist, Bisexual characters were not found to be represented in the dramas and comedies examined in the current research. Perhaps Bisexual characters are still considered more controversial, confusing, promiscuous, or some other trait, which excludes them from receiving representation of the same magnitude as Gay male and Lesbian characters.

Fifty-five jokes with Gay themes were told by Gay male or Lesbian characters; this was significantly more than the 29 jokes told by heterosexual characters. This finding supports the assumption that many of the Gay males and Lesbians portrayed on TV are in the ridicule stage of representation. This could be due to TV writers sensing that it is more socially acceptable to have Gay and Lesbian characters ridicule themselves than for other characters to make fun of them.

Significant differences were not found in the number of shows where Gay male and Lesbian characters interacted with children versus the number of instances that heterosexual characters interacted with children. This finding shows that Gay male and Lesbian characters are not prevented from identifying with children, which can be seen as a major advancement over past stereotypical images of Gay males and Lesbians as dangerous child molesters, not to be trusted in the company of children.

Furthermore, Gay male and Lesbian characters were shown in roles where they had frequent and continuous relations with children. In The Ellen Show, Ellen’s character is a teacher, a job that demands that she be in almost constant contact with children while she is at work. Will & Grace portrayed Jack as a loving father taking care of his son.

The mean number of affectionate displays shown by Gay male and Lesbian characters and heterosexual characters was not significantly different. The fact that Gay male and Lesbian characters and heterosexual characters had around the same number of displays of affection is encouraging because it indicates that Gay male and Lesbian characters are becoming more able to express their sexuality. However, the intensity of the displays of affection for Gay male and Lesbian couples shows that they are most likely to be shown performing non-sexual acts of affection. This analysis of the type of affectionate displays supports previous findings that indicate that Gay and Lesbian characters are
limited to non-sexual displays of affection in romantic relationships. Holding hands and giving hugs might be considered acceptable displays of affection for a Gay male or Lesbian couple, but kissing and implications of sexual activity would be very unlikely to be shown (Sender et al., 1998).

Although portrayals of Gay male and Lesbian characters have become more positive over time they are still being ridiculed on TV. Gay males and Lesbians as a social group are transitioning from stage one, non-representation, to stage two, ridicule, of Clark’s (1969) theory of media representation. This research also lends support that some Gay male and Lesbian characters are moving into the Clark’s third stage of regulation and might even be moving into the fourth stage of respect. However, it may be some time before the Gay males and Lesbians are portrayed at the same frequency as more established minorities such as Blacks. Unfortunately, no Bisexual characters were observed in the present sample. This fact, along with the variation of portrayals of Gay males and Lesbians throughout the sample could indicate that Clark’s (1960) stages are not a set or rigid stair steps with minorities constantly progressing towards more and better representations. Rather, they serve as a framework for assessing the general portrayal of the period while acknowledging that representations may regress into previous stages.

Berry’s (1980) three periods when applied to a Gay male and Lesbian sample yielded mixed results. There was only partial support for Gay males and Lesbians to be classified in Berry’s Stereotypic Age. Some stereotypes, such as a flamboyant Gay man with pithy jokes, seem to have endured. Other stereotypes of Gay males and Lesbians as sexual predators and criminals have faded.

Similarly, The New Awareness has not fully arrived for Gay males and Lesbians. While there has certainly been an increase in the number of Gay males and Lesbians shown in leading roles and supporting parts, these gains have happened only in a few shows. Furthermore, even for the eight shows targeted for their portrayal of a re-occurring Gay male or Lesbian character, two (25%) did not feature those characters during the episodes taped.

There was no indication that Gay males and Lesbians were in Berry’s (1980) final period of Stabilization. None of the shows sampled had casts consisting primarily of Gay males and Lesbians. Even though Will & Grace had the highest percentage of Gay males and Lesbians in the main cast (40%), there were still only two characters who identified as Gay males. Additionally, the content of Will & Grace rarely deals with
themes unique to the Gay males, but prefers to stick to more general issues, such as dating, that transcend sexual orientation.

The current study had several strengths and weaknesses. Although several articles have been written about Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual portrayals on TV, no other actual research studies could be found. Clark’s (1969) four stages of representation have been applied to several minority groups, but his theory has not been applied to Gay males, Lesbians, or Bisexual people. Berry’s (1980) three periods of minority portrayals had also not been used to analyze the portrayal of Gay males, Lesbians, and Bisexuals. Another strength of this study was that all the major TV networks were included in the sample.

A weakness of the current study involved the number of episodes that were analyzed. For example, the desired characters did not appear during the episodes taped on two of the shows: Friends and The Hughleys. In fact, only nine (75%) out of an expected 12 characters were observed. A sample including more episodes would have improved the study. Having a larger sample size to draw from would have also made the results more generalizable.

Only the major networks were analyzed even though viewers of TV have a large array of cable channels to choose from including premium channels that have been found to be more liberal in their representations of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters particularly when it comes to the acceptance of sexual behavior (Murray, 2002). Additionally, pay cable channels have recently developed several new TV programs with Gay male and Lesbian characters. Cable channels have different requirements and broadcasting standards about smoking, sexual behavior, and drug use (Murray). For the sake of uniformity, these channels were excluded from the current study. Future research should analyze the portrayal of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters on pay and cable networks in addition to the major networks.

When conducting future research, researchers should distinguish between the different genres of shows being analyzed and different time periods of programming. The current study looked only at comedies and dramas during prime time. Daily programming including soap operas and reality shows should be analyzed in future research to increase the generalizability of the findings.

Additional research on the portrayal of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters on television needs to be conducted to see how they are continuing to be represented. Future research that is based on Clark’s (1969) stages or Berry’s (1980) periods may choose to expand the operational definition of each stage or period to be inclusive of evolving stereotypes.
methods of ridicule, and avenues of respect portrayed on TV. A further study of this topic may reveal that Clark’s (1969) stages of representation serve more as a framework for analyzing the level of representation of a minority group in the media at a given time; once a group has attained a particular stage there is no guarantee that they cannot revert back to an earlier stage. Likewise, Berry’s (1980) periods may be more useful in a longitudinal study that assess the progression of representation over several decades as opposed to trying to analyze the current level of portrayal. There may also be important items specific to the portrayal of Gay male, Lesbian, and Bisexual characters, such as romantic and sexual relationships, that could warrant the creation of a new scale designed specifically for this group rather than relying on schemas originally designed for others.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Titles, Networks, Timeslots, and Day of Week for Television Shows

The following list identifies the title, network, timeslot, and day of the week aired for the nine TV shows analyzed in this study.

- *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, UPN, 8:00 p.m., Tuesday
- *Dawson’s Creek*, WB, 8:00 p.m., Wednesday
- *The Ellen Show*, CBS, 8:30 p.m., Friday
- *ER*, NBC, 10:00 p.m., Thursday
- *Friends*, NBC, 8:00 p.m., Thursday
- *The Hughleys*, UPN, 8:00 p.m., Monday
- *Spin City*, ABC, 9:30 p.m., Tuesday
- *Will & Grace*, NBC, 9:00 p.m., Thursday
APPENDIX B

Description of Why Each Show Was Chosen for Analysis

The following is a brief description of the character or characters identified as Gay males or Lesbians who precipitated each show being chosen for consideration in this study.

- *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* had two re-occurring characters identified as Lesbians: Willow and Tara.
- *Dawson’s Creek* had one re-occurring character identified as a Gay male: Jack.
- *The Ellen Show* had two re-occurring characters identified as Lesbians: Ellen and Bunny.
- *ER* had one re-occurring character identified as a Lesbian: Dr. Weaver.
- *Friends* had one re-occurring character identified as Bisexual: Ross’s ex-wife.
- *The Hughley’s* had two re-occurring characters identified as Lesbians: the Lesbian neighbors.
- *Spin City* had one re-occurring character identified as a Gay male: Carter.
- *Will & Grace* had two re-occurring characters identified as Gay males: Will and Jack.

Not all of the known Gay male or Lesbian characters appeared on their respective shows during the episodes taped for analysis.