

Racial Triumph and Success on Reality Game Shows: The American Dream and Race on *The Apprentice*

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I . Introduction

The Apprentice (2004-), a prime-time reality show on NBC, is produced by Mark Burnett, one of the most successful reality TV producers. Donald Trump, a real estate tycoon and the CEO of the Trump Organization, hosts the series, which documents the 13-week job interview with a group of candidates from all over the U.S. The candidates share a suite in the Trump Tower in Manhattan. They are divided into two teams, and each team is referred to as a corporation. Each week, they must accomplish a business task and select a project manager who would lead the team in that task. The winners are allowed to go back to the suite, whereas the losers are sent to Trump's boardroom, where one of them is fired and sent home. In the season finale, the two finalists compete for the top prize, a

chance to become Trump's real apprentice and help run one of his companies under a one-year contract worth \$250,000. The first season of *The Apprentice* achieved spectacular ratings; the season finale drew 27.6 million viewers. The show's influence is demonstrated by the appearance of a number of similar shows such as *The Cut*, *Project Runway*, *The Law Firm*, and *America's Next Top Model*. *The Apprentice* celebrated its tenth season in 2010, and the show now is a global franchise, adopted by over 16 countries.

The Apprentice represents a reality genre widely known as the "reality game show." This genre features contestants striving for a prize (e.g., cash or employment) over an extended period of time. Despite the idiosyncrasies of each series, the reality game format follows a similar formula. To encourage team dynamics, contestants are divided into groups, and they compete against one another in a series of tasks. At the end of each show, a contestant from the defeated team is eliminated by votes or by the host. The last contestant remaining wins the prize.

A central feature of the reality game show genre is the diversity of contestants. A reality game show typically casts contestants from a wide range of backgrounds in terms of their race, gender, age, education, occupation, and sexual orientation. What is particularly intriguing is that many reality game shows often portray people of color who do not necessarily conform to the negative racial stereotypes that have characterized popular film and television for decades (see Bogle 2001). Throughout its many seasons, *The Apprentice* has depicted numerous contestants of color who were of high social status such as investment bankers, political consultants, stock brokers, senior government managers, and attorneys.

In the contemporary America saturated with stereotypical racial minority images, what are the social implications of the reality genre that

consistently portrays successful, articulate, and non-stereotypical racial minority contestants? Can reality game shows provide an unusual opportunity to challenge the viewers' preconceived notions about racial minorities and offer role models that people of color can relate to and be motivated by? Or, do series such as *The Apprentice* support the myth of the American Dream and meritocracy, thereby masking the structural barriers that make racial inequality unavoidable?

By investigating the audience reading of *The Apprentice*, the study evaluates both the limitations and possibilities of the racial discourse on reality TV. The study identifies how the viewers of different races read the discourse of the American Dream and race on the series. The study explores *The Apprentice* not as a unique reality series but as part of a broader genre of reality TV that recurrently features successful racial minorities. The findings would provide valuable insights into the ideological implications of racial diversity on reality game shows.

II. The American Dream, Reality TV, and the Audience

The American Dream has two myths: material and moral (Fisher 1973; Thio 1972). The material myth is that America offers abundant success opportunities for all citizens. The moral myth is that all men are created equal, and thus treated equally in America. Media scholars note that reality game shows such as *The Apprentice* embody this powerful premise of the American Dream, suggesting that "this is a country where anyone, regardless of race, religion, or economic status, has a chance to become wealthy and powerful, *a la* Trump" (Allen 2004: par. 4). In the first episode of season one, Trump emphasized the value of meritocracy in

corporate America, stating “If you’re not careful, it can chew you up and spit you out. But if you work hard, you can hit it big. And I mean really big.” Similarly, Binswager stated:

[*The Apprentice*] was a weekly demonstration that success is not a matter of “the old-boy network” or “exploitation” or any of the vicious leftist caricatures, but of hard work, planning, courage, and practical wisdom … It is a concretization of “the American Dream.” (Binwager 2004: par. 1)

The executive producer Mark Burnett is an American Dream personified. He appeared on an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* entitled “Living the American Dream.” As a British citizen and a son of factory workers, Burnett came to America with \$600 in his pocket and held a job as a nanny in L.A. But his “hard work” made him a television producer whose influence is now global. Burnett stated that he “was entranced by the American Dream, and the notion that a person could make anything of himself that he wanted” (Burnett 2001: 44).

Burnett has mentioned the driving force behind his television series: the American Dream, Social Darwinism, natural selection, and the survival of the fittest. He stated that “*Survivor*, I’ve said more than once, is Social Darwinism … *Survivor* reflects the current state of societal evolution” (2001: 143). The candidates on *The Apprentice* appear to exemplify the American Dream. In the first season, Troy, a contestant with only a high school diploma, stated that “Trump has certainly given everybody a shortcut to the American Dream. But, I’m gonna earn the American Dream just like everybody else.” Many candidates overcame disadvantageous backgrounds (e.g., some grew up in a housing project, and others only had a high school diploma) and became successful CEOs, Wall Street investment bankers, and self-made millionaires. Although they had achieved

their American Dream, they all gathered together for another American Dream, which is to become apprentice to Trump, a person who represents wealth and power. The backgrounds of the winners of the series (e.g., Whites, Blacks, men, women, Americans, and Englishmen) support the myth that one can be successful in America regardless of race, gender, or nationality.

Scholars have offered critical insights into the ideology of the American Dream in (reality) game shows and talent shows (Fiske 1983, 1987; McNamee & Miller 2004; Redden 2008). Fiske argued that game shows play an ideological function because their narrative (e.g., all start out as equals but finish differently) fosters the myths that are key components of the capitalist ideology: individualism, personal responsibility, and social mobility.

[In game shows, contestants] are constructed as different but equal in opportunity. Differences of *natural* ability are discovered, and the reward is upward mobility into the realm of social power which “naturally” brings with it material and economic benefits ... Social differentiation is thus displayed into, and naturalized by, a notion of individual differences (Fiske 1987: 266).

This view suggests that despite the positive portrayal of people of color, reality game shows can provide evidence that economic inequality among racial groups is a natural consequence of different racial abilities. By constructing this inequality as natural and inevitable, reality game shows can legitimize the racial hierarchy and potentially camouflage the structural barriers that can limit the social mobility of people of color.

Media scholars have claimed that the depiction of racial diversity can create an impression of openness in American society and fail to challenge

systematic racism (Cloud 1996; Gray 1986, 1989; Haggins 1999; West 1993). In their study of *The Cosby Show*, Jhally *et al.* (1992: 131- 132) claimed that despite its “purely innocent” intention to portray a successful, respected Black family, the series had negative implications because it diverted the audience’s attention from structural barriers that deprived racial minorities of equal opportunities. In society where racial equality has not been achieved, the images of successful people of color can function as a symbolic basis to justify the racial hierarchy and economic inequality. Television shows featuring people of color who are of high social status can also promote what Bonilla-Silva (2003) calls the colorblind ideology, the idea that racism is a thing of the past and thus no longer explains the income inequality between different racial groups. Banks claimed that the overrepresentation of Black judges on reality court shows such as *Judge Greg* and *Moral Court* can undermine the public support for racial diversity “by suggesting that our nation’s benches are already diverse, or that Blacks and/or women have taken over the courts” (Banks 2003: par. 11).

However, media scholars have cautioned against quickly dismissing reality TV. Prior research on reality TV audiences has rejected an implicit assumption about passive, gullible audiences (Keighron 1993; Kilborn 1994, 2000; Hill 2002, 2005, 2007). The audiences live in an environment that nurtures their knowledge of the genre. There is no shortage of media content that cultivates the audience’s knowledge of the reality genre. VH1, a sister company of MTV, the Mecca of reality TV, revealed the “secrets” behind the production of reality shows. VH1’s *Reality TV Secrets Revealed* series offers interviews with producers and former contestants, informing the viewers that the producers edit scenes out of context to create a story or false continuity and that the seemingly natural interaction among the cast is often carefully staged. As viewers become familiar with reality TV and develop knowledge about its generic codes and conventions, they

become increasingly savvy about fictional elements in the creation of reality shows, including typecasting, unrealistic settings, staged performance, and manipulative editing.

Scholars have claimed that audiences critically engage with the cast's interaction on reality TV. In his study of *Video Diary*, Keighron noted that the viewers were aware of various tricks involved in television production and thus had the capacity "to cut through the layers of skepticism and cynicism with which we have learned to protect ourselves from the professional media, the great manipulator" (1993: 24). The viewer "performs a series of different mental operations in order to assess the reality status" (Grodal 2002: 68). Hill also observed that British audiences of reality shows displayed a deep distrust of the reality that such shows purport to present. Half of the respondents in her study reported that the reality portrayed on reality shows was often staged. Hill characterized British audiences as "cynical of the reality of real TV and alert to the performative nature of factual entertainment" (2002: 328). Gray (2009) and Hendershot (2009) claim that the popularity of reality TV has a great deal to do with the pleasure of mocking what is portrayed on screen.

Prior research on reality TV has suggested that the audience's assessment of the truthful status of the reality genre may influence its reading of reality shows. However, little is known about how the viewers' awareness of the genre's conventions mediates the ways in which they interprets racial discourse. In this regard, this study contributes to the race and reality TV literature by examining the ways that the ideological discourses of race and the American Dream is reinforced, negotiated, or challenged in the audience's discussion about reality game shows.

Ⅲ. Textual Analysis

This study analyzed the final episode of the first season of *The Apprentice* (about 70 minutes without commercials). To date, this has been the most watched episode of the series, with 27.6 million viewers watching the final competition between the two finalists: Bill (White male) and Kwame (Black male). Bill, a graduate of Loyola University, founded and ran a thriving multi-million dollar cigar company in Chicago. Kwame graduated from the Harvard Business School and worked as an investment banker at Goldman Sachs. The final episode is an abridged version of the entire first season. Thus, this episode was useful for the reception analysis since the respondents unfamiliar with the show could understand the show's premise and context. *The Apprentice* is based upon and enacts two major ideological discourses: The American Dream and Social Darwinism. Trump states in the beginning of the episode:

Over three months ago, I invited 16 candidates to come to New York City for the chance to win the dream job of a lifetime. They came from all walks of life. Some were self-made entrepreneurs. Others learned about business from some of the finest business schools in the country. A few had only a high school diploma. Venture capitalists came to compete against copier salesmen. But they all shared the same goal to work for me as my apprentice.

The rules of the competition dictate that every contestant on *The Apprentice* has equal status in the competition, and that the strongest candidate wins the apprenticeship. It is not the candidates' background but their ability to perform a series of challenging business tasks that

determines who will work for Trump and run one of his multi-billion dollar corporations. Bill's victory attests to the fairness of the game. Although Kwame had a better education, Bill won the reward because he outperformed other candidates in a level playing field. Bill's success has ideological connotations because it proves that you can achieve economic success regardless of who you are through your determination and hard work (American Dream), and that the strongest and fittest survive and dominate (Social Darwinism).

The Apprentice may have negative social implications with regard to racial inequality. First, the show's promotion of the American Dream contains ahistorical perspectives, suggesting that historical legacies do not explain racial inequality, but individual differences do. The show indicates that a person's success is purely an individual feat and so is failure; and thus, race is irrelevant. By highlighting a few successful people of color who have overcome adverse conditions and achieved the American mainstream, *The Apprentice* implies that economic success is available to all people of color regardless of their circumstances. Thus, the portrayal of successful Black candidates like Kwame can have socially harmful social ramifications because a few instances of Black success can "serve as a substitute for serious historical and social analysis of the predicaments of and prospects for all Black people, especially the grossly disadvantaged ones" (West 1993: 21). Not only does *The Apprentice* divert attention from the historical context of poverty and racial inequality, but it also obscures the fact that, in the real world, there are numerous people of color who work hard but still remain poor. The discourse of *The Apprentice* can serve to legitimate racial inequality while muting structural barriers that deprive racial minorities of equal opportunities. The portrayal of Kwame on *The Apprentice* insinuates that Black people are poorer than White people because they do not work hard enough. The show offers an

ideological basis on which to blame Black people for their own poverty.

Second, *The Apprentice* demonstrates the hierarchical racial order, the idea that Black people (or people of color) are inferior to White people. *The Apprentice* embraces the notions of Social Darwinism, natural selection, and the survival of the fittest, all of which used to be closely tied to the discourse of racial superiority widespread in the 19th century and early 20th centuries in western societies. *The Apprentice's* ideological premise implies that only the strongest survives, prospers, and enjoys wealth and success in capitalist societies. The weaker ones remain lower in the social hierarchy because of their deficiencies in a number of characteristics, including intelligence and motivation. *The Apprentice* embraces the ideology of Social Darwinism (e.g., differences of natural ability and disposition) and promotes the sense of White superiority and the rhetoric of biology- or culture-based racism.

IV. Audience Reading of Race

This researcher conducted 11 small focus group and 7 in-depth interviews with White and Black study participants. The respondents were recruited in Philadelphia and its vicinity by word of mouth. With the exception of an interview with an interracial couple, all of the groups were composed of participants who were friends or family members sharing a common racial background. This helped to mimic their daily television viewing experience and helped the respondents to feel comfortable watching a TV show together and discussing potentially sensitive topics about race (see Bobo 1989, 1995; Jhally and Lewis 1992). The racially separate groups enabled the researcher to explore whether and how these groups made different readings of the same racial discourse. In total, 41

respondents participated in the research: 28 White (6 males, 22 females) and 13 Black (7 males, 6 females). Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 42 (average 28.5). The research ensured that the pool of respondents is diverse in terms of education (ranging from high school degree holders through graduate/professional degree holders), occupation (e.g., contractor, lawyer, security officer, teacher, car salesperson, realtor), and the employment status. At a university classroom, the respondents watched the episode with the researcher, who later led a discussion about various aspects of the show. In the interviews, the researcher asked how the respondents perceived the sense of realism and the idea of equal opportunity on the *Apprentice* (e.g., How realistic was *The Apprentice* in terms of its portrayal of corporate life? Do you think each candidate has an equal chance to become the apprentice?) Then, the researcher encouraged them to comment on the idea of the American Dream and economic inequality in America (e.g., Regardless of where he starts, can a Black person become as successful as Kwame if (s)he works hard?) The researcher asked guiding questions (e.g., What do you think of Donald Trump's decision to choose Bill for his apprentice?) to keep the discussion on track, but the semi-structured discussions were relaxed and informal so that much of the information shared emerged from the natural flow of conversation. Respondents shared their candid opinions about a variety of issues about race brought up during the interview, including race-based policies such as affirmative action. For some respondents, a VHS or DVD copy of the episode was given so that they could watch it at a more convenient time or location prior to the interview. Each interview, which lasted about 45-75 minutes, was recorded for a thorough analysis.

Assessment of Realism

Given the popularity and longevity of *The Apprentice*, it was not

surprising that most of the respondents, regardless of whether they watched the show on a regular basis, were aware of the premise of the show, including the types of people who appear on *The Apprentice* and the processes through which a contestant becomes Trump's apprentice. The respondents were quick to point out that *The Apprentice* is a reality game show in which competition drives the main narrative. The respondents named other reality shows such as *Survivor*, *America's Next Top Model*, *American Idol*, and *Big Brother*. They distinguished *The Apprentice* from other types of reality shows such as *The Real World* and *Wife Swap*, in which the main emphasis is not so much on competition as it is on drama and conflict.

When encouraged to talk about the sense of realism they perceived from *The Apprentice*, the respondents offered a wide range of opinions, describing what they considered as realistic or unrealistic. Many respondents stated that a number of aspects portrayed on *The Apprentice* not only resonated with their experience but also were plausible in their daily lives. For instance, several respondents mentioned that the fierce competition between the show's contestants accurately reflected the reality of competitive job markets. Others mentioned that it was common in the workplace to see a female contestant like Heidi, who refused to take responsibility for tasks and shifted it to others. The respondents who had worked in a collaborative environment found the portrayal of teamwork dynamics realistic, stating that communication problems often lead to bigger problems in the workplace.

While perceiving a sense of realism in *The Apprentice's* depiction of competition and the cast's interaction, the respondents also perceived some contrived aspects of the show. Many respondents commented that it was unrealistic that the tasks were always team-based projects and that the teams were always engaged in a series of competitive activities. Several

respondents noted the highly unrealistic setting of the boardroom, where the contestants pleaded their employment. One respondent indicated that in real life, one would not be fired so easily after working for just one day.

Not that he would lose. But certain events would be set up in a certain way that would lead him for a loss. This is informed because I actually met someone who was on America's Next Top Model. And she told me that it is very much pre-orchestrated. Not like you know that you're going to lose when you walk in the door, but that once they get to know you a little bit, they make up your mind very early on, and encourage certain characteristics in the cast or whatever the participants to ensure the outcome that whoever in charge would like to have. (White female, 24)

Most noteworthy is that the respondents' recognition of the unrealistic elements of *The Apprentice* was closely associated with their awareness of the reality genre's characteristics. The respondents often mentioned the intervention by the show's producers in various situations and the deceptive editing involved in the production of the show. Many respondents commented on a scene in which Bill's team accuses an employee of dumping a sponsor's sign in a trash can. The respondents suspected that the producers purposefully hid the sign to create a troubling situation for Bill's team and observe how the team would deal with the challenge. Although it is not clear from the episode whether the producers really did hide the sign, what matters is the respondents' *belief* that the producers' ultimate goal of producing an entertaining program undermined a truthful depiction of reality. Overall, the respondents' familiarity with the reality genre's conventions offered a context in which the respondents critically assessed the sense of realism on *The Apprentice*.

The respondents also stated that the sense of realism on *The Apprentice* diminished as the seasons progressed, giving the following reasons. First, newer contestants were more aware of the show's convention, and thus, they tended to stage their personality to appeal to Trump. As a result, the cast's interaction was not as authentic as it had been in earlier seasons because the contestants started to act for the camera. Second, the producers started to incorporate more artificial elements into later seasons to maintain audience interest. Several respondents commented that the producers included several contestants whose main motive was to simply enjoy 15 minutes of fame, not to become Trump's apprentice, purely for entertainment purposes.

Perception of a Level Playing Field

When asked whether each contestant was provided equal opportunities to be the apprentice, only a few respondents agreed. They considered the competition on *The Apprentice* to be fair because they believed that the diverse pool of candidates demonstrated that Trump did not discriminate against anyone on the basis of their background. Although the contestants had diverse backgrounds in terms of their age, gender, race, occupation, and education, they were all eligible to compete for what Trump called the dream job of a lifetime. For example, a person with only a high school diploma was given a chance to compete against a person with an MBA degree from Harvard (e.g., Kwame). Several respondents stated that what determined the ultimate winner in prior seasons was the contestant's actual task performance (e.g., how to manage various challenges), not his or her background. The respondents also noted that the contestant's background was irrelevant because the tasks did not necessarily require special training or expertise available only through higher education or specific professions, and that with everyone being equal, Trump was only

interested in selecting the best contestant who outperformed his or her peer in the series of challenges.

However, the majority of respondents immediately rejected the idea that the candidates have equal opportunities to become the apprentice. The respondents suggested that although the show *appears* to provide all contestants equal opportunities, it does not offer a level playing field for the following two reasons. First, the respondents believed that the candidates with a prestigious background have a better chance of winning because they are less likely to be eliminated by Trump in each episode. They believed that Trump favored well-educated candidates because he regularly mentioned the importance of education on the show. Two respondents mentioned that Kwame would not have made it to the final competition if he did not have a Harvard degree. They also stated that Trump preferred to hire a person with corporate experience (e.g., someone who would fit the need of his organization), not someone in an independent business (e.g., a realtor). Second, they believed that education and experience would matter on the show because a candidate with an MBA from Harvard and corporate experience would be more likely to outperform a self-made entrepreneur with a high school diploma in performing the tasks on *The Apprentice*:

Everyone has a chance but I don't know if it's equal. Like the second season I watched... They were both very educated. Maybe it was the third season, it was someone who was very educated versus someone who was not and they picked the one who was educated and it was kind of like a no-brainer. (White female, 25)

The respondents also rejected the idea of a level playing field because *The Apprentice* did not offer a pool of candidates who were equally

qualified. They recognized that ratings-driven reality game shows must cast some contestants who are less capable than others to ensure a mixture of candidates with differing abilities, creating interesting dynamics in the competition. That is, if each contestant were equally qualified, it would be difficult to portray the hierarchy among the candidates, and the boardroom decisions would be difficult. Several respondents commented that although it would not be impossible for less qualified candidates to outperform those with a superior background, it would be unlikely.

Here, the broader implication is that the respondents' awareness of the genre features of *The Apprentice* enabled them to refuse the idea of a level playing field that the show attempted to construct. Throughout the interviews, the respondents offered many examples to support their skepticism of the show's construction of a level playing field. For instance, several respondents suspected that when the women of Protégé Corporation repeatedly outsmarted the men of Versacorp, the producers intervened on behalf of the men (by shuffling the teams so that they could maintain similarly sized teams) because the show would have been less exciting if only the men got fired. The respondents also stated that after losing many male contestants, Trump purposefully fired several female contestants to maintain an appropriate gender ratio. Overall, despite the strong code of realism on *The Apprentice*, there was no evidence of the respondents' uncritical acceptance of the discourse of a level playing field. The respondents felt strongly that the producers' intervention made the competition contrived and unfair. Most respondents agreed that candidates had *a* chance, but not an equal chance, to become Trump's apprentice.

Perception of the American Dream

Very few respondents accepted the American Dream without qualification. Most respondents expressed skepticism about the validity of

the American Dream. Many supported the view that although hard work may bring a person a better life, it is a powerful myth that every individual has equal opportunities to become successful because there are a number of other factors that determine a person's financial success. The respondents believed that children from affluent middle-class families have better life chances than those from working-class families because they are far more likely to attend college and secure good jobs. The respondents also perceived informal networks or social capital as a major factor that invalidates the idea that an individual can achieve financial success only through hard work. Overall, the respondents agreed that if an individual were to have certain advantages (e.g., socioeconomic status, upbringing, family support, college education, connection, or social capital), he or she would be more likely to achieve professional or financial success.

The respondents, both White and Black, generally agreed that race is an important factor that influences one's life chances. Many commented that the American Dream is more difficult for people of color to achieve than for White people, particular in corporate America. That is, although people of color may not face outright prejudice, they may have more difficulty securing access to internal support and resources. Several White respondents stated that Kwame's Harvard degree would definitely give him an advantage over less educated Blacks or Whites with the same degree because he was the type of candidate who would attract a number of companies looking to hire people of color for their racial quota. However, even if Kwame were to benefit from affirmative action, he would be disadvantaged by the absence of helpful networks and connections at the top because of the underrepresentation of Blacks in upper management. Several respondents indicated that the still-powerful and so-called good ol' boy network in the upper echelons constitutes a glass ceiling, a barrier that blocks the career ladder for people of color as well as for women. Several

White respondents who worked in the corporate environment stated that people in powerful positions, such as Trump, tend to hire people who share similar values, and that such people are more likely to be White men.

So then him [Kwame] being a successful and educated African American, he's going to get interviews left and right. He'll get his foot in the door. He'll get hired. Will he then be invited to go smoke cigars with the ol' white boys after work? Probably not. Will he be happy in that work environment, if everyone is somewhat holding on to old racist values? Probably not. (White female, 25)

The respondents, both White and Black, acknowledged that Blacks do not have the same opportunities as Whites because Blacks may encounter implicit discrimination in the workplace. Many stated that while one may not make an explicitly negative comment on Blacks, Whites may still hold a prejudicial and stereotypical view of Black people. Several White respondents admitted that they had concerns or fears related to Black people, and that their view could subconsciously affect their interaction with Black people. Both White and Black respondents indicated that Black ethnic names, speech patterns, and vernacular, widely known as Ebonics, could lead to discrimination in various social settings such as applying for jobs or searching for housing.

When encouraged to talk about the economic status of Black people, the respondents were quick to point out poverty that impedes their economic progress, namely, the destitute conditions in which a huge percentage of Blacks live. Both White and Black respondents stated that because Blacks are more likely than Whites to be born into poverty, it is difficult for them to have opportunities that can enable them to make middle-class income. That is, the vicious circle of Black poverty continues because it is difficult

for someone to escape poverty if he or she is born into poverty. Virtually all the respondents agreed that although achieving the American Dream is not impossible for Blacks, it is much harder for Black people because of their underclass status.

Noteworthy is that virtually all the respondents, both Black and White, strongly disagreed with the idea that any Black person can be as successful as Kwame as long as he or she works hard. The interviews suggest that the respondents were fully aware that the lower economic status of Black people severely limits their economic opportunities and life chances. When asked about Kwame's success, many speculated that Kwame was raised by affluent parents who supported his education. In other words, the respondents considered Kwame as an exception, rather than as an example demonstrating that Black people can achieve the same financial prosperity that Whites enjoy as long as they work hard.

Just because respondents are critical of the idea of the level playing field does not necessarily mean that they are aware of the historical construction of racial inequality. Note here the difference between White and Black respondents. Black respondents stressed that the continuing impact of slavery (e.g., the inferiority complex) hinders Black progress. Several Black respondents mentioned that the historically inherited racial stigma makes Black economic progress difficult. Others mentioned that the culture of poverty places collective pressure on Blacks, particularly Black males, to maintain their poverty status because their efforts to perform well in school or at work can make them a target of criticism or even violence. Some Black male respondents commented that it is hard to be motivated to excel because poverty cultivates nihilism and a culture that devalues progress.

Although White respondents did not explicitly attribute the negative racial stereotypes (e.g., lazy, unintelligent, and lacking work ethics) to the

economic inequality between Whites and Blacks, they indirectly suggested that their poverty is associated with their lack of motivation and work ethics and that this limits their performance in the workplace. Several White respondents relied on cultural factors (e.g., the negative impact of Black popular culture, such as rap music) to explain the lower economic status of Black people.

White and Black respondents also differed in their perception of the need for equal opportunity policies. White respondents rarely mentioned the impact of slavery that resulted in cumulative inequalities (e.g., Black people started out with nothing). Entman *et al.* (2000: 16-45) argue that Whites and Blacks are constructed differently with respect to the history of slavery and its continuing impact on contemporary America. Thus, it is not surprising that White and Black respondents displayed different perspectives on equal opportunity policies. Black respondents were more supportive of affirmative action than White respondents, who often stated that it is reverse discrimination and thus an unfair policy.

In one of my companies, to my detriment, I had an African American woman supervisor who, in my opinion wasn't really qualified and she brought in one of her African American women friends to the position that should have been mine. And as a result I didn't get that and someone who I felt wasn't as qualified got it but it was because of the help of that woman. (White female, 44)

Reading the Black Candidate

Most Black respondents were excited to see a successful Black contestant, Kwame, on the show. The majority of Black respondents stated that they identified with Kwame and wished that he had won the final competition. They felt that Kwame was not only successful but also

likeable. The interviews suggest that Blacks tend to pay closer attention to Black contestants on reality shows such as *The Apprentice*. Some Black respondents identified several Black winners on reality game shows, including Fantasia (*American Idol*) and Randal (the fourth season of *The Apprentice*). They stated that, unlike fictional shows, in which Black people tend to play minor roles or be portrayed negatively, reality TV tends to represent successful (not stereotypical) Black contestants and that reality TV gives Black people an unusual opportunity to win competitions. Many Black respondents mentioned that they had been both surprised and excited when they saw Black contestants win on reality game shows. Several Black respondents stated that the portrayal of successful and “real” Black people on reality game shows can be inspiring and empowering for Black people because they can motivate those Black people who have pessimistic attitudes to think about their future and work harder to better their lives. Several Black respondents also mentioned that they were glad to see Black people in business because successful Black people tend to be confined to the areas of sports and entertainment, which people do not associate with intellectual ability.

White respondents’ reading of Kwame provided three salient findings. First, unlike Black respondents, who tended to build an emotional bond with Kwame, White respondents did not establish any strong racial identification with Bill. White respondents, instead, were able to relate to Kwame in terms of his personality and management style. There were a number of White respondents who stated that they would prefer to work with Kwame either as his employer or employee. This cross-racial identification suggests that the positive implications associated with the portrayal of non-stereotypical, intelligent people of color on reality shows. Several White respondents commented that an articulate person such as Kwame on reality shows can disrupt Whites’ prejudiced view of Black

people' ability:

I know my own grandparents like wouldn't be happy if I brought home a Black person because they'd probably think that because he's Black, he's you know not as smart or educated. And if they watched that show that we just watched, I know that they would feel that Bill was the better candidate, but maybe not able to put their finger on why. (White female, 25)

Overall, the depiction of successful Black contestants on *The Apprentice* has two positive implications. First, capable Black contestants serve as role models who inspire Black people to work harder and increase their self-esteem. Second, positive Black images can challenge the stereotypes that exist both inside and outside the Black community (e.g., Black people remain poor and underrepresented in corporate America because they are unsuitable for intellectual tasks). Even if cross-racial identification exists, its positive potential is limited in that such identification remains at the individual level. White respondents' recognition of positive characters did not necessarily promote a critical understanding of race relations beyond a conventional critique of stereotyping and individual prejudice.

V. Conclusion

Media scholars have argued that central to television game shows is providing equal opportunities to contestants from different backgrounds. The study began with a thesis that the myth of individual equality (e.g., a level playing field) on reality game shows may serve to justify the actual

socioeconomic inequality among different racial groups in the U.S. because they may naturalize the ideological discourse of the American Dream and meritocracy. To identify the ideological implications of the discourse of *The Apprentice*, the present study examined how White and Black audiences make sense of the show's construction of a level playing field in relation to their general understanding of the American Dream and the economic inequality among different racial groups, particularly Black poverty.

The findings clearly indicate that neither White nor Black respondents used *The Apprentice* as evidence to support the idea of the American Dream. Not only did the respondents refuse to accept the idea of fair competition on *The Apprentice*, but they also invalidated the American Dream, the idea that individuals in the U.S., regardless of who they are and where they start, can enjoy material success through hard work and determination. The responses from the interviews suggest two main reasons behind their rejection of the discourse of a level playing field on *The Apprentice*.

First, while perceiving a great sense of emotional realism in *The Apprentice*'s depiction of competition, the respondents were disinclined to accept the discourse of the American Dream because their knowledge of the generic conventions of reality game shows (e.g., artificial settings to foster interesting team dynamics) mediated their viewing, enabling them to be critical of the ways in which *The Apprentice* constructed a myth of equal opportunities. The respondents were well aware that, unlike sports game broadcasting, in which the producers portray naturally occurring events without any intervention, reality game shows require the producers to actively intervene in the competition because their ultimate goal is to make an interesting show, not to foster a fair game. The respondents believed that the producers' obtrusive intervention (e.g., casting, editing,

and manipulating situations), motivated by their commercial agenda, made the competition not only artificial but also unfair, and that it decreased the credibility of the shows' premise of a level playing field.

Second, *The Apprentice* failed to naturalize the myth of equal opportunities because the American Dream may have lost its faith among the American public. According to a survey by the Kaberry Research Centre (Longley, 2004), two thirds of Americans believe that the American Dream is becoming more difficult to attain, and nearly half believe that they cannot achieve it. The survey indicates that the American public perceives poor-quality public education and financial insecurity as powerful barriers limiting their life chances. The survey's findings are consistent with those of the present study. Because the respondents were aware of the importance of social class in determining material success, they rejected the idea of the level playing field implied in the American Dream; both White and Black respondents did not believe that Black people, regardless of their social class, can achieve financial prosperity as long as they work hard. This indicates that the overall skepticism about a level playing field in the U.S. mediated the respondents' reading of the ideological discourse of *The Apprentice*. Therefore, even if the producers were to create a powerful and plausible discourse of the American Dream on *The Apprentice* (or even if the audience were to accept the idea of a level playing field *within* the confines of the show), the audience's existing disbelief would prevent it from naturalizing and validating the myth of the American Dream. In addition, it is possible that the audience's recognition of unfair competition among the contestants of different backgrounds and qualifications on *The Apprentice* may further reinforce its existing skepticism about a level playing field in American society.

However, although the respondents were reluctant to accept the discourse of the American Dream on *The Apprentice*, this study does not

propose that reality game shows featuring successful people of color have the potential to promote the audience's critical perspectives on race relations. There was a noticeable difference between White and Black respondents with respect to the extent to which they evaluated the continuing impact of slavery and institutional racism. Black respondents were well aware of how slavery brought about the racial inequality that continues to deprive Black people of economic opportunities. Thus, they understood the historical context of the corrective measures such as affirmative action, which attempts to provide underrepresented racial minorities with equal opportunities. On the other hand, White respondents acknowledged a number of barriers associated with the Black underclass that constrains life chances for Black people, but their understanding of such constraints did not lead them to support equal opportunity policies. This difference suggests that Whites do not believe in the enduring effects of slavery on economic inequality between Whites and Blacks. Although White respondents understood the economic inequality from a rational perspective, they did not sympathize with the Black underclass and support equal opportunity policies, which aim to remedy the structural inequality. On the contrary, they believed that such policies make the playing field unequal and unfair.

The positive implications of the portrayal of successful racial minority contestants on reality game shows seem to be confined to the individual level. By showcasing competent people of color who are articulate and successful, reality game shows may help challenge racial prejudice and dispel the stereotypes that racial minorities lack intellectual ability and management skills and thus are suitable only for menial jobs. Such successful racial minority contestants can provide tangible evidence that racial minorities can be just as intelligent and capable as the White majority if they are given the same set of opportunities. They can also

serve as positive role models; they can empower minority audiences and inspire them to be positive about their abilities and to take best advantage of their environment to advance their lives. The positive representation of racial triumph and success, particularly among White audiences, again seems limited because the type of racial discourse that reality shows promote remains largely at the individual level, thereby failing to address the systemic and institutional issues about race and racism.

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Abstract

Racial Triumph and Success on Reality Game Shows: The American Dream and Race on *The Apprentice*

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By investigating an episode of *The Apprentice*, the study discusses whether reality game shows serve to justify the actual socioeconomic inequality among different racial groups in the U.S. by naturalizing the ideological discourse of the American Dream and Social Darwinism. To identify the ideological implication of the *The Apprentice*, the study examines whether the respondents accepted the premise of fairness on *The Apprentice* and how they made sense of the show's construction of a level playing field in relation to their general understanding of the American Dream and the discrepancies in the economic status among different racial groups in the U.S.

Key Words: reality game shows, the American Dream, race, *The Apprentice*, racial inequality

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