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# The Portrayal of African American Youth in the Media: A Textual Analysis

Michelle Nelson

*St. Catherine University*, [michelle.nelson327@gmail.com](mailto:michelle.nelson327@gmail.com)

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## The Portrayal of African American Youth in the Media: A Textual Analysis

by

Michelle L. Nelson, B. S. W.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
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Master of Social Work

Committee Members  
Jessica Toft, Ph. D., (Chair)  
Naomi Pitlick, MSW  
Kasim AbdurRazzaq MSW, LICSW

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

### **Abstract**

African American communities receive a substantial amount of attention in the media. From newspapers to major television outlets, often times the lead stories involve African American communities. The media's portrayal often times focuses on African American's status in society regarding their employment and income status, involvement in the criminal justice systems and other social service systems and their educational standing. Additionally, social policies and the impact of media on populations is discussed in the available literature. This study uses Schneider and Ingram's theory (1993) of social construction of target populations to examine the ways African American youth are portrayed within the *Star Tribune* and *Pioneer Press*. By using grounded theory, codes and themes were identified in the discourse. The most common theme depicts African American youth as contenders (negative and strong) followed by portrayals as deviants (negative and weak). Less frequently African American youth were portrayed as dependents (positive and weak) and the least common portrayal depicts them as advantaged (positive and strong). The most frequent media portrayal of African American youth as negative and strong may perpetuate society's current beliefs about this population and may limit the possibility of change. Furthermore, the lack of positive portrayals may suggest that society does not yet view this population in this way despite evidence that African American youth are just as likely to be positive and successful as other groups. Future research should focus on the portrayals of African American youth in various parts of the country to gain a better understanding of the overall portrayal or how it may differ from one area to the next. Additionally, future research should explore the effect and accuracy these portrayals have within the African American.

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### **Introduction**

The portrayal of African American youth is contested. It is not uncommon to see in local newspapers and the local news stories of African American youth and violent crimes or criminal activity. On one hand mainstream media focuses news reports on gang violence, movies and newspaper articles related to criminal activity, violence, and poverty. On the other hand, current media focuses on injustices at the hands of police and authorities including the shooting of unarmed teenagers, Trayvon Martin from Miami in 2012, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 and the injury and death of Freddie Gray while in Baltimore Police custody in 2015. Activist groups such as Black Lives Matter have emerged to address the treatment of African American and this has also received widespread media attention.

When considering how African American youth are portrayed in the media, an understanding of how well they fare in society is necessary. According to the United States Census, data from 2008, 13% or 38 million African Americans live in the U.S. and this population group is relatively young; 41% of African Americans are under the age of 25 and 16% or about 5 million youth are between the ages 10 and 17 (US Census, 2008). Edelman (1992) asserts that, “millions of Black children are not getting a fair chance to lead healthy and productive lives. From birth to young adulthood, African Americans still face obstacles as they struggle to achieve decency, dignity and success in America” (para. 1). While this quote is more than 20 years old, African American youth today still struggle to achieve those same things and face challenges as evidenced with their experience with education, employment and the criminal justice system.

Within the education system African American male students are subjected to harsher punishments than other racial groups (Curtis, 2014; Castillo, 2014; American Psychologist Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Dating back to 1975, the Children's Defense Fund studied data from the Office for Civil Rights and found that rates of suspension for African American students were greater than those for White students (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). The overrepresentation of African American students affected by school exclusion policies, (i.e. Zero tolerance policies) is not dependent on enrollment rates of African American students (Skiba et. al, 2002). This means that African American students are subjected to discipline more frequently than other racial groups despite that the number of African American students enrolled may be lower than other racial groups. Even more alarming are the suspension and expulsion rates for African American youth. The percent of African American children suspended or expelled at some point in their educational career is more than double that of White children: 35% compared to 15%, respectively (NAACP, 2015). With the overrepresentation of African American students being disciplined, suspended and expelled, school can become an unwelcoming environment for these youth. Furthermore, it may appear to the public that African American youth are generally more violent than other youth.

Another factor that may affect how African American youth are portrayed in the media is how well they perform academically in school. African American students are underperforming at disproportionate rates compared other races based on grades and standardized test scores (Miranda, Webb, Brigman & Peluso, 2007; Center on Education Policy, 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2012, African

American students had a higher dropout rate from public schools than White students, 6.8 % compared to 1.6 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). In contrast, among all public high school students in the 2011-2012 school year, the graduation rate for White students was 85% while it was only 68% for African American students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The data suggests that African American students fare less successfully in educational settings compared to White students in the United States. This may affect how they are portrayed in the media. Discussion of the achievement gap and consequences of the No Child Left Behind legislation on predominantly Black Schools leaves the impression with the public that African American youth are not as cognitively adept as other youth.

Employment rates are another factor that may impact how African American youth are portrayed in the media. African Americans experience challenges surrounding employment. African American males experience unemployment rates twice that of Whites in urban communities in the United States (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006). Additionally, “about one-third of young Black men in the United States today are out of work. The jobless rates for young Black male dropouts, including those incarcerated, are a staggering 65%” (Alexander, 2011). Furthermore, low employment rates for African Americans contribute to the rates of African Americans experiencing poverty. According to Macartney, Bishaw and Fontenot (2013), the U.S. Census Bureau data shows that between 2007-2011, 14.3 % of the U.S. population was living below the poverty line and 25.8% of African Americans were living in poverty. African American youth experience employment challenges that have implications for their economic well-being and



personal identity as members of their families and communities (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006) and perhaps how they are portrayed and perceived by the public.

African American youth overrepresentation in the criminal justice system may be another factor contributing to the portrayal of African American youth in the media. In the United States, the data are no more optimistic for overrepresentation in the criminal justice system than those previously stated regarding education and employment for African American youth. Given the obstacles regarding employment for African American youth, minor crimes, such as dealing illegal drugs, can provide a means for survival. African Americans are incarcerated at disproportionate rates throughout the U.S. despite empirical evidence suggesting that White youth deal, use and abuse illegal drugs more than African American youth (Alexander, 2011). In 2000, a study revealed, “White youth aged 12-17 were more than one-third more likely to have sold illegal drugs than African American youth” (p. 99). Despite the facts about who uses, deals and abuses drugs, African American youth are still stopped, searched and incarcerated at higher rates (Alexander, 2011, p. 138). This unequal arrest rate may lead the public to view African American youth as less law-abiding than other youth.

The impact of media’s portrayal of African Americans on young African Americans may be problematic because it may contribute to discrimination of this young group of society and may contribute to structural inequality and institutional racism in educational settings. Educational discipline policies are a prime example of how discrimination may impact the day-to-day lives of African American youth. This is of importance because if society gains its information from the media and constructs its belief systems based on the idea that what the media says is true, society is bound to

contribute to and perpetuate the negative images and ideas of young African Americans (Martin, 2008). According to Martin (2008), the national organization Children Now found that children and adolescents are susceptible to the media's images across races and they associate positive characteristics with Caucasian television characters and negative characteristics to African Americans and other minority groups (p. 339). Not only is this damaging to the public's view of African American youth, but it also may be internalized by African American youth themselves (Martin, 2008). Furthermore, empowerment theory suggests that the perceptions of self in society contribute to "individual, community, and social change" and to their sense of empowerment (Guitierrez, 1990, p. 3).

Social workers and professionals need to be aware of how African American youth are portrayed in the media in order to point out inaccuracies and institutional discrimination. This, in turn, will promote social justice for equal treatment in various settings including schools, African American communities and other public settings. The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2008) asserts one of the principal responsibilities of social workers is to ensure human dignity and to act to prevent discrimination against any person or group on any basis. It is vital for social workers to advocate for African American youth and to aid them in overcoming the ideas projected onto them about their race and culture. Professionals in the field must act in ways that prevent discrimination against this group by societal structures and institutes such as educational settings as explored earlier. The social work profession needs to support young African American students in overcoming their negative stereotypes and aid them in creating positive image of themselves.

The purpose of this study is to review written media from *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and *St. Paul Pioneer Press* newspapers to answer the question of how African American youth are portrayed in local, mainstream, newspapers.

### **Literature Review**

#### **History and Policy Related to African American Youth**

The United States had a series of historical economic and cultural events and policy developments during the 1980s and beyond that has created a problematic and marginalized backdrop for African American Youth.

**War on Drugs.** In the late 1970s, Richard Nixon “declared illegal drugs ‘public enemy number one’” and called for a ‘war on drugs’ (Alexander, 2011). Following Nixon, Ronald Reagan officially announced his administration’s War on Drugs in October of 1982 (Alexander, 2011). Despite the fact that less than 2% of Americans viewed drugs as the most important issues facing the nation, Reagan largely increased the budgets for federal law enforcement agencies to fight drug crimes (Alexander, 2011). During the time the drug war was beginning, globalization and deindustrialization were taking a negative toll on African American inner-city communities resulting in plummeting employment rates and skyrocketing incarceration rates (Alexander, 2011; Drug Policy Alliance, 2015). The African American communities were hit even harder when the “Reagan administration launched a public relations campaign designed to change the public perception of drug use and the threat posed by illegal drugs” (Nunn, 2002). The purpose of this media campaign was to highlight the dangers of drugs and to draw attention to those who are drug users. The media’s attention and the focus on the epidemic of drugs and drug users had devastating effects on African Americans.

Due to the lack of employment opportunities in their communities, drug dealing became an alternative option for African Americans living in inner-city communities. The crack epidemic began in 1985, resulting in violence in inner cities and among drug users (Drug Enforcement Administration, n.d.; Alexander, 2011). Powder cocaine was converted to a smokeable form of cocaine known as crack cocaine and sold at higher purity levels than powder itself (Drug Enforcement Administration, n.d.). The negative effects of crack and crack cocaine forced tougher antidrug legislation resulting in the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. This legislation included mandatory minimum sentences for distribution of cocaine and more severe minimum sentences for crack cocaine users (Alexander, 2011). Alexander (2011) suggests that crack cocaine is more associated with African Americans and cocaine in powder form is more associated with White Americans. Given this perception, studies show that crack cocaine is associated with higher crime rates for young African Americans, thus subjecting them to harsher sentences under the 1986 legislation. African Americans, were discriminated against and punished more harshly for their crack cocaine use than others who used powder cocaine.

**History of zero tolerance policies.** Dating back to the 1990s, educational settings have implemented discipline policies to ensure school safety. The Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1990 was approved by Congress to curb school violence and prohibit the possession and use of firearms in or around schools (Walton, 1995, p. 336). The creation of zero tolerance policies in schools soon followed (Cramer, Gonzalez, & Pellegrini-LaFont, 2014). Zero tolerance policies are one-size-fits-all disciplinary actions that mandate suspension or expulsion for students who commit offenses that involve weapons, drugs or other forms of violence. (American Psychological Associations Zero

Tolerance Task Force. 2008; Cramer et. al., 2014). These zero tolerance policies impose predetermined punitive consequences for students' misbehavior without considering the situational context, gravity of behavior or mitigating factors (American Psychological Associations Zero Tolerance Task Force. 2008).

Although zero tolerance policies were implemented to improve a sense of school safety, there are drawbacks to these policies. The extensive body of research around these policies suggests that the policies are commonly punitive in nature and disproportionality target African American males more than any other ethnic group (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010). Zero tolerance policies have been criticized for responding to behavior problems with suspensions rather than responding proactively; this potentially increases dropout rates especially for those with emotional behavioral disorders (Cramer et. al. 2014) African American students are over-represented among those with emotional behavioral disorders and are therefore more likely to dropout (Harry & Klinger, 2006). According to the 2009-2010 special education report compiled by the Georgia Department of Education, African American students comprise 39% of the special education population but make up 47% of the students labeled with having emotional and behavior disorders (Fanion, 2010).

**Status of youth in Minnesota.** Minnesota youth are facing the odds when it comes to experiencing economic hardships, academic success and their level of involvement with the juvenile justice system. In the year 2007, the United States experienced The Great Recession, which had devastating effects on employment rates across the nation. While Minnesota's unemployment rate is roughly 3.5%, rates for youth 16-19 are much higher (Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic

Development, 2015). In 2012, 18.6% of Minnesota youth ages 16-19 were unemployed and this gap has widened since the beginning of The Great Recession in 2007 (Governing the States and Localities, 2012). Furthermore, this evidence suggests that Minnesota youth are facing economic hardships, which may contribute to negative outcomes and portrayals, especially for African American youth.

Minnesota youth are facing difficulties when it comes to safe and accessible housing. According to the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation Homeless Youth study from 2012, nearly half of Minnesota's homeless population is comprised of youth 21 years and younger, many who are children who were homeless with their parents. In a broader sense, "residential segregation by government design...underpins many of the challenges African Americans face" in regards to home ownership and accessibility to safe and stable living conditions (Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013).

Between the 2006-2007 school year and the 2011-2012 school year, dropout rates for 9-12 grade public high school students in Minnesota ranged from 3%-1.9% for the consecutive years. Minnesota compares to the national combined dropout rate for the 2011-2012 school year at 3.3% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Presently, Minneapolis Public School District and St. Paul Public School District are comprised of nearly one-third African American students (Minnesota Department of Education, 2015). Additionally, about one-third of Minneapolis Public Schools and St. Paul Public Schools are not meeting student achievement rates in math, science and reading resulting in detrimental effects on the large population of African American students in these school districts.

The pipeline to prison is a phenomenon recognized for using punitive discipline policies in schools “resulting in criminalizing students rather than educating them (American Civil Liberties Union School to Prison Fact Sheet, 2008). These policies and the pipeline to prison phenomenon disproportionality impact students of color and push them out of classrooms and into the criminal justice system. Students who are suspended and expelled are “often left unsupervised and without constructive activities; they also can easily fall behind in their coursework, leading to a greater likelihood of disengagement and drop-outs” (American Civil Liberties Union, School to Prison Fact Sheet, 2008, para. 2) factors which increase the likelihood of involvement in the justice system. In regards to Minnesota youth and their involvement in the juvenile justice system, African American youth ages 10-17 comprise 8% of the youth population but are 34% of the juvenile delinquency arrests (Department of Public Safety Office of Justice Programs, 2014). In 2013, 24% of youth in correctional facilities were African American youth ages 14-17.

### **Social Construction of Target Populations**

Social construction of target populations according to Schneider and Ingram (1993) “refers to the cultural characterizations or popular images” (p. 334) of people or groups of people whose “behavior and well-being are affected by public policy” (p. 334). The idea of social construction of target populations posits that stereotypes created by “politics, culture, socialization, history, the media, literature, and religion” (p. 335) form either positive or negative constructions of certain populations. The model suggests there are four types of target populations within social construction and political power: advantaged, dependents, contenders, and deviants. The advantaged are politically

powerful and have positive social constructions, such as the elderly, veterans and scientists. The contenders are politically powerful but have negative social constructions and are thought to be undeserving, such as the wealthy, unions, and cultural elites and minorities. The dependents are not politically powerful but hold positive social constructions and are thought to be the disabled, children and mothers and finally, the deviants are weak in regard to political power and hold negative social constructions. The deviants are thought to be criminals, drug addicts and gang members. Due to the disproportionate incarceration rates of African American youth and minority groups in general in the United States, one can see how they may be categorized as deviant within Schneider and Ingram's (1993) framework.

These social constructions rely on the notion that the purpose of public policy is to change the behaviors of certain target populations by means of coercion or enabling (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). The portrayal of African Americans in the media often times portrays them as deviants, criminals and those who have no political power. This is important for the welfare of this group, because the authors contend that how groups are conceived relates to the types of policies created for them; if portrayed in a positive light, a group would have more positive policies created and if portrayed as politically strong, these would be even positive policies with funding to ensure they were effective. However, if portrayed in a negative light, a group would have punitive policies created for them. If politically strong, policymakers would be less likely to try to push through really punitive policies due to the strong resistance as well as political fallout for doing so. In this case then, if the group is not politically strong, then they would be the most likely of the four groups to have punitive policies applied to them.



Public policies impact these target populations because it suggests their status in society, how they are viewed and treated by the government. The dominant messages conveyed about dependents are they are “powerless, helpless and needy” (p. 342) while deviants are conveyed as bad people who behave poorly and cause problems for others. The public and these target populations encounter and internalize those messages through “observation of politics and media coverage” (p. 34). This notion of social construction of target populations suggests that the specific design of public policy provides an explanation for why some groups are more advantaged than others and depicts the power public policy has over the portrayal and creation of stereotypes of such target populations.

**Portrayal of African Americans in television.** Today’s media, comprised of television, radio, newspapers, magazines and other sources of news and information influences the way individuals perceive the many cultures of the world. Often times, media sources perpetuate or contribute to negative stereotypes of specific populations or groups. According to Faber, O’Guinn, and Meyer (1987), media influences majority groups’ knowledge and beliefs about minority groups. This, in turn, impacts the responses of minorities to the majority groups. The media shapes an individual’s beliefs. It is possible that stereotypes created about certain races and cultures contribute to the ways in which members of society treat these races and cultures. This can result in “unequal power structure disenfranchising those groups” (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000, p. 692). In a study completed in California about 40 years ago, more than half of the White children sampled reported that television was their primary source of information about African Americans. Those children who were exposed to a high degree of African

Americans on television were likely to believe that the portrayal of them was “true to life” (Greenberg, 1972). Although this study is dated, the media’s effects on perceptions are likely still relevant.

Several research studies have found that African Americans are portrayed in a more negative light in television programming than Whites (Klein & Naccarato, 2003; (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). In a study completed in Pittsburgh, researchers analyzed three weeks of local television newscasts and found that almost 80% of the references to African Americans were negative (Klein & Naccarato, 2003). African Americans were more likely than Whites to be portrayed as perpetrators of crimes. In a study examining the portrayal of minorities on prime time television shows, African Americans were negatively portrayed more than Caucasian or Latino characters (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Whether in the news or in television shows, these examples all share the common idea that African Americans are portrayed on television more negatively than other racial groups and that more often than other groups they are portrayed as the perpetrators of crime.

**Impact of negative media portrayal on youth.** African American youth are impacted by the power of media and what it says about other African Americans (Martin, 2008). Media images perpetuate negative stereotypes of African American youth and shape the majority of society’s views of them (Martin, 2008). According to Frazier (2003), media’s “pervasive nature raises concerns about its role in the social construction of identities” (p. 1443). The identities of African American youth are created and reinforced by the media and impedes African American youth from creating their own identities (Martin, 2008, p. 338). Ford (1997), states that media can activate constructs

within the mind that influence how people judge and relate to each other (p. 267).

Furthermore, the portrayals of race and culture in the media shape the way specific groups think and feel about themselves (Martin, 2008). When African American youth are negatively portrayed, this impacts their self-image, their development and “sense of who they are or who they can become” (p. 338). When African American youth accept the negative stereotypes portrayed in the media, a culture of African American youth with poor self-image, jaded racial identities and an internalized view of themselves as inadequate results (Martin, 2008).

The purpose of this study is to review written media from the Twin Cities print media to determine the social construction of African American youth. Specifically, the research question is: How are African American youth portrayed in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and *St. Paul Pioneer Press* newspapers from 2007-2015?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Before one can fully understand this research, it is important to consider the theoretical foundation it relies on. Theories can influence the way a researcher interprets available literature, previous studies and impact the researcher’s future work in the field. The main theories held in mind by this researcher while completing this study are discourse analysis theory and critical race theory.

#### **Discourse Analysis Theory**

Discourse analysis theory suggests that language, in both spoken and written forms, contributes to and impacts society and its perspectives on cultures and identities (Gee, 1999). Gee (1999) suggests that humans find meaning in everything from the stars to art. The way individuals interpret and assign meanings is based on their own social

values and that too often humans attribute meanings to people, situations, and objects without a deeper and more thorough examination. Furthermore, Gee's discourse analysis theory suggests that "cultures, social groups, and institutions get produced, reproduced and transformed through human activities and identities" (p. 1) and through the human activities and interactions, certain activities and identities are assigned a level of value and meaning. These activities and identities contribute to the formation and existence of social groups and institutions. This theory relates to the media's portrayal of African American youth because through society's experiences with media, interpretations are made and values about African American youth are formed. The media can shape individuals experiences, interpretations and values of African American youth in negative or positive ways. The way African American youth are portrayed in the media can determine the meaning and value assigned to this population group, by themselves and by others according to this theory.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Another framework that informs this research project is the critical race theory. Critical race theory has three components. The first facet of the theory asserts that racism is ordinary and a part of everyday life and that it is a complicated and difficult issue to address (Delgado, 2012). Alexander (2011) has described that from days of slavery and Jim Crow laws to today, African Americans have been marginalized, disenfranchised and discriminated against and in order to make any changes in the way people treat and view African Americans, the public consensus must change. The second facet supports the notion that racism advances the interests of Whites both materially and psychically and therefore there is little reason for the larger society to dismantle it (Delgado, 2012, p. 8).

The final facet of this theory says that “race and races are products of social thoughts and relations” (p. 8) and that race is invented and manipulated when deemed necessary.

Critical race theory is important to understand while examining the portrayal of African American youth in the media because it provides a context for understanding why African American youth fare the way they do in today’s society.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This research study was a discourse analysis of how African American youth were portrayed in the largest local mainstream newspapers, the *Star Tribune* and the *Pioneer Press* between 2007 and 2015.

### **Sample**

Due to the scope of this project, the sample for this study was collected only from the *Star Tribune* and *Pioneer Press* newspapers. These newspapers were selected because they are the two most frequently circulated newspapers in Minnesota’s two biggest cities and they represent the urban core of the state. These two popular newspapers provided examples of how African American youth are portrayed by the local mainstream newspapers. The articles were selected from 2007, which was the beginning of the United States Great Recession, to the present, 2015.

### **Data Collection**

A systematic sampling strategy was used to gather 56 articles. ProQuest Newsstand was used to gather articles from the *Star Tribune* and Access World News was used to gather articles from the *Pioneer Press*. The search terms used in both searches was “African American teenagers” and “African American youth” (note: the

quotation marks were not used in the search term). Once the search was completed, each of the articles was scanned to determine if it was relevant to the search based on if there was information relevant to the search terms. If the same article was retrieved from both searches, one was excluded. See Appendix for articles included in the discourse analysis.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The sample was analyzed using a grounded theory method. By using grounded theory, the researcher read the text and performed open coding to identify descriptive ideas. The data was read through a second time using a constant comparative method to determine commonalities and more abstract meanings among codes (axial coding) at which point categories were developed based on the abstract meanings. Finally, a third reading was conducted to assure reliability of final codes and themes (Padgett, 2012). Discourse analysis theory asserts that the more common a theme is found in the narrative, the more power and significance associated with these ideas (Wilson, 2003).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The media coverage of the African American population today may be shifting as incidents such as the shooting of unarmed teenagers, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and the injury and death of Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland while in police custody are relayed in the mainstream media. A strength of this research is that it is timely and relevant given today's political unrest among the African American community. It may also be enlightening in the potential to demonstrate how a group's portrayal can change. Discourse analysis allows for this research to be useful in making explicit the latent messages and stereotypes depicted by powerful media sources.

This study's limitations are mainly due to the location and types of newspapers examined. Due to the large number of newspapers available in the Twin Cities, the two most popular newspapers were selected because of their large audience. However, independent, alternatives or culturally specific newspapers were not included. This limits the study to mainstream portrayals and popular local media stories or events and does not include rural or smaller communities' perspectives or news stories; therefore, this study does not seek out the voice of minority communities, and in particular, the African American community. This study's findings cannot be generalized to other areas around the United States. Another limitation is that the study only utilizes two search terms, "African American youth" and "African American teenagers" to make the search manageable. However, this may have limited the number of relevant articles during the search, for example, by not considering the term, "Black." It is possible that the specificity or narrowness of the search terms will not retrieve all articles that could be related to African American youth. Portrayals associated with "Black," may be somehow systematically different than those associated with "African American," and therefore, the results can only be generalized for articles that refer to "African Americans."

### **Findings**

The analysis of 55 newspaper articles resulted in an array of codes or patterned references to the ways African American youth are portrayed in two specific newspapers. While the researcher analyzed the discourse using discourse analysis theory and critical race theory, the codes were comprised of six themes that coincide with Schneider and Ingram's Social Construction of Target Populations theory (Schneider & Ingram, 1993); African American youth presented as dangerous, comparison of African American youth

to White youth, negative self-image, victims of dysfunctional systems, resilient and successful and the focus of change efforts. Of the four possible combinations of strength and qualitative portrayals, all four combinations were evident: the first category consisted of themes that portrayed African American youth as negative and strong, the second consisted of themes that portray African American youth as negative and weak, the third consisted of themes that portray African American youth as positive and weak. Finally, the fourth category consisted of themes that portray African American youth as positive and strong.

### **Negative and Strong**

Within the category negative and strong, the theme of African American youth presented as dangerous was evident in the *Star Tribune* and *Pioneer Press* discourse. This portrayal fits within in this category because often times African American youth are portrayed as perpetrators of acts of violence or engaging in illegal activity. Society views these actions as negative and these portrayals have strong effects on society's views and opinions on African American youth. This was the most common portrayal found throughout the discourse.

**Presented as Dangerous.** The text depicts African American youth as dangerous on several occasions. This theme was derived when the researcher came across content that described African American youth as aggressive, assaultive, violent and as the participants in unsafe behaviors at school. Koumpilova (2014) asserts African American students' behaviors with another minority group in school indicated "...weekly fights between black and Karen students in hallways, on school buses and after schools. The conflicts had become a major learning distraction and safety concern" (para. 9). This



depicts African American youth as not only aggressive and unsafe but also portrays them as being to blame for hindering learning for themselves and others. The portrayal of African American youth as unsafe and dangerous continued in another article from the *Star Tribune* from 2014. The article noted the "pattern of African-American youth killing each other" (Anonymous, para. 14) and the lack of knowledge around the root causes as a concern for the community, especially for the African American community. Society fears the unknown and with a lack of knowledge of African American youth and the root of their actions, the public's fear is perpetuated by the media's biased portrayals of the actions of African American youth. Another article published in the *Star Tribune* in July 2008 outlined a "vicious assault" (para. 5) where all of the accused are African American youth ("More Violence", 2008). The same article states, "When blacks commit violent crimes, some will predictably use the incident to reinforce their racist views and indict all young black people" ("More Violence", 2008 para. 6). Another portrayal of African American youth as dangerous stems from statistics reported in the media. An article published in the *Star Tribune* discusses the curfew violation rates for Minneapolis youth. Golden (2015) asserts, "black teenagers, for example, were more than 16 times more likely to be arrested for curfew violations or loitering than their white peers" (para. 1). Sawyer (2014) presented a similar statistic around curfew violations, "70 percent of those picked up are black, about 6 percent white" (para. 13). This portrayal also suggests that it is possible African American youth spend a lot of time unstructured and out on the streets.

References to gang involvement were also suggestive that African American youth are dangerous; an article by Rosario (2013) describes several instances where

assaults and beatings and murders have happened as a result of a "predominately black gang" (para. 21). The article included an interview with a veteran St. Paul police officer who stated, "this is not normal behavior, whether it's black, white or Asian kids, But right now, it's not white, Latino, or Asian kids doing this" (para. 22). Emphasis on African American youth engaging in gang-related behavior supports the theme of African American youth portrayed as dangerous.

The portrayal of African American youth as dangerous was the most prevalent theme throughout the discourse. The high frequency of this theme suggests that the perception among the media and society is that African American youth are dangerous and are perpetrators of crimes and violence. This portrayal of African American youth as dangerous fits within the category of negative and strong because of the strong effect youth's 'dangerous' behavior has on how African Americans view themselves and how they are treated by society. The fact that this negative and strong portrayal was most apparent in the discourse suggests that the media has a strong focus on portraying African American youth as dangerous, which also has an impact on the way society views and treats African American youth.

### **Negative and Weak**

Within the category of negative and weak, African American youth were being frequently compared to White youth and considered students of color. These comparisons between African American youth and White youth were related to the achievement gap and poverty that exists between the two groups. Also, African American youth were commonly compared to other minority groups and considered students of color. Another portrayal that fits this negative and weak category is the notion that African American

youth have a negative self-image of themselves. The portrayal of African Americans as negative and weak was the second most common theme throughout the discourse.

**Comparisons of African American youth to White youth.** On several occasions, the text compared African American youth to White youth. These comparisons typically showed differences between the two racial groups that highlighted the poorer performance, social conditions, or treatment of African American youth. The researcher identified several codes within this theme and chose to present the three most frequently referenced codes: *achievement gap*, *comparison of poverty rates* and *African Americans as students of color*.

***Achievement gap.*** The academic standing of African American students compared to White students appeared in the text frequently. When the researcher came across phrases such as "eliminating the achievement gap between black boys and white students" (Walsh, 2007, para. 12) or "in a state with one of the widest learning disparities in the nation (between white students and students of color)" ("A Smart Move", 2013, para. 13) the researcher coded this as a comparison of African American youth to White youth in regard to the academic achievement gap that exists between the two demographic groups. Other phrases that alluded to the *achievement gap* code include, "white girls outperform African-American girls" (Meyerhofer, 2014, para. 14) and "achievement gap" (Walsh, 2007, para. 12). The text also referenced the lower graduation rates of African American youth compared to their White counterparts and according to an article published in the *Star Tribune*, the author states, "if students of color in Minnesota graduated at the same rate as White students by 2020, more than \$1.3 billion could be added to the state economy." ("A Smart Move", 2013, para. 12). Throughout the

comparisons, African American youth were portrayed as not performing as well as White youth. It is possible that this portrayal skews society's view of African American students and assumes that they lack intelligence compared to White students. This portrayal does not consider the bigger picture of the education systems and the various factors that contribute to student's academic abilities such class sizes or the amount of individual instruction students receive.

*Comparison of poverty rates.* The code of comparison of poverty rates between White youth and African American youth was derived from instances where the researcher noticed information given about White youth closely followed but contradicting information for African American youth. For example, in an article by Olson (2011), he compares the poverty rates for white children and black children; "While Minnesota had the nation's fifth-lowest poverty rate for white children that year...its rate for African-American children was fifth-highest" (para. 2). This reference suggests that in Minnesota, the poverty rates for white children are much lower while the rates of African American children experiencing poverty is much higher. The same statistic was also present in an article by Rosenblum (2011) and an article from the *Star Tribune* in March 2011(Anonymous, para. 2).

*African Americans as students of color.* Another code was created due to the frequency of times African American youth were grouped or categorized with other minority groups. These comparisons or groupings typically showed the similarities between African American youth and other minority groups. While the similarities aligned African American youth with other minority groups and generalized them as students of color, it frequently compared them in opposite fashion to White youth. Two

types of references that alluded to this code are "low graduation rates" and "overrepresentation in special education programs".

When the researcher came across information in the text that discussed African American youth and other minority groups' graduation rates, or high school dropout rates, these references were coded as *African Americans as students of color*. An example from the literature includes, "the four-year high school graduation rate stands at 77.6 percent statewide. Minneapolis is at 50 percent. And the statewide rate for African American and American Indian students ranges from 45 to 51 percent" (Ragsdale, 2013, para. 5). Another reference that alludes to the code of *African American as students of color* in respect to graduation rates was found in an article by Brandt (2012), "New federal data this week indicated that Minnesota ranked last in four-year graduation rates for Latino and American Indian students, second to last for black students and near the bottom for low-income students" (para. 3). This reference shows how African American youth are compared to other minority groups and categorized together with minority groups to represent students of color. Through these comparisons of students of color to White youth, the portrayal suggests that students of color may be of lesser intellectual ability and that it is the student's responsibility for the lack of academic achievement or school completion. This portrayal does not allow one to see the bigger picture as to why African American youth and students of color are not achieving the same graduation rates as their White Counterparts in the academic setting and has a strong impact on the way society views students of color.

Another common comparison between African American students and other minority students found in the text suggests that students of color are overrepresented in

special education programs. When the researcher came across phrases related to special education and special education programming that linked African American students with other minority students these references were also coded as *African Americans as students of color*. In an article written by Meitrodt (2013), the author quoted Bernadeia Johnson, former Minneapolis Public Schools superintendent, on the overrepresentation of African American youth and other minorities in special education, "We are disappointed in the overrepresentation, and we know we must do something about it...it's too high" (para. 9). This quote suggests that students of color, African American as well as non-white students, are overrepresented in special education. The same article notes that bias against students of color is impacting special education programs as well, "School officials in Minneapolis and St. Paul, where the issue is most stark, acknowledged that racial bias is tainting special education" (para. 88). These examples suggest that African American youth are often lumped together with other minority youth groups and portrayed as having higher enrollment in special education programs. The effect of categorizing African American students with other minorities may be that society views students of color as less academically capable.

**Negative self-image.** The text depicts African American youth as experiencing a negative self-image. This theme was derived when the researcher came across content that described African American youth struggling with their self-esteem, value and feelings of not belonging. An article published in May 2014 in the *Star Tribune* states, "During an interview, Walker said that one thing he hears over and over from kids is that they 'don't feel valued.'" ("Schools Attend", para. 6). Walker is part of the administration behind the Office of Black Male Achievement with Minneapolis Public Schools, which

focuses on "better understanding the problems of black males and ways to address them" (2014). Another article published in the *Star Tribune* in 2010 commented on a social worker's experience working with African American middle school boys who did not expect to see age 21, who had no hope for their future (Anonymous, para. 14). The literature also made references to the fact that when African American youth are "isolated in separate classrooms" due to a disability, this is "devastating" to the child and impacted overall school performance and confidence (Meitrodt, 2013, para. 10-11). Additionally, African American students with certain disability labels "led many black students to conclude they were 'bad'" because they were not in the same classrooms or programs as other disabled peers (Meitrodt, 2013, para. 47). The discourse suggested the treatment of African American youth has a negative impact on the way they think of themselves as members of society.

Throughout the literature, there were many instances when African American youth are compared to White students portraying them as negative and weak. The disparities between African American youth and White students in relation to the achievement gap, the rates of poverty create a bipolar image of the two, with White youth experiencing higher performance levels and social conditions than African American youth. Additionally, the literature exaggerates this bipolar image when it lumps African American youth with other minority groups and portrays African American youth as students of color. The theme of African Americans having a negative self-image fits within the negative and weak category because it calls attention to the power that society's messages and portrayals has on African American youth. African American youth as negative and weak was the second most common portrayal found throughout the

literature. This suggests that among society African Americans tend to be viewed as negative individuals with little power or say in the systems that impact them.

### **Positive and Weak**

Within the category positive and weak, the theme of African American youth as victims of dysfunctional systems appeared within the discourse. This category was the third most prevalent portrayal of African American youth found in the discourse.

**Victims of dysfunctional systems.** Throughout the literature African American youth were portrayed as victims of dysfunctional systems. Within the *Star Tribune* and *Pioneer Press* discourse, there were three categories of systems that have failed or victimized African American youth: school systems, criminal justice systems, and social services systems.

***School systems failing African American youth.*** The text provided several examples of how school systems have failed or victimized African American youth. When the researcher came to references of schools failing African American youth, disproportionate disciplinary actions or overrepresentation of African American youth in special education programs, the researcher coded these as *African American youth as victims of dysfunctional school systems*.

***School systems failing African American youth academic needs.*** An article by Johnson (2009) quotes a professional with experience and strategies on how to close the nations' achievement gap: "traditional schools weren't making progress with poor African-American students" (para. 2). This author pinpoints that traditional education models were not effective for all students and despite evidence of the ineffectiveness, little change was happening. According to an article written in the *Star Tribune* (2014),



"on just about every measure of Minnesota School performance, young African-American males are at or near the bottom of the list—with the lowest grades and test scores of any population" ("Schools Attend", para. 1). This author reinforces the idea that the existing models of teaching and performance evaluation are not effective for African American youth. Another article from the *Star Tribune* calls attention to the fact that Minnesota school systems are failing African American youth and that it is an urgent situation that should be addressed; "In Minnesota, educational outcomes for kids of color continue to lag far behind those of their white peers. As the Minnesota Campaign for Achievement Now (MinnCan) reported last year, the learning disparities are an education 'emergency' that demands immediate attention" ("Honor King's Legacy", 2012, para. 4). The text provides examples of how it is apparent that traditional teaching methods are ineffective and that testing and performance evaluation shows that African American students are not successful. However, other than stating the issue needs attention, there is no evidence suggesting change is happening or will happen with the education systems to benefit African American students or make them more successful.

*Schools as funnels to criminal justice systems.* Other references point out how schools disproportionately discipline and suspend these African American students. According to Golden (2014), "One in four African-American boys in the city are suspended from school at least once a year" (para. 8). An article from the *Star Tribune* (2008) wrote, "Black youth account for about a third of all school suspensions while making up only 17 percent of student enrollment" ("Suspending Students", para. 3). The same article discussed the subjective treatment and discipline of African American students, "While a small percentage are sent home for serious violations such as assaults,

drugs or bringing weapons to school, most get suspended for things like mouthing off, talking too much or too loudly, or challenging school staff...statistics indicate they use suspension more often with black students" ("Suspending Students", 2008, para. 4).

*Schools funneling African American youth to special education.* The researcher noted several references of African American youth as overrepresented in special education programs. This includes references to how Minnesota schools fail prevent African American youth from needing special education services and that once African they are in special education, they are not supported well. According to Meitrodt (2013), "more than 4 percent of all black students in Minnesota are identified as having emotional behavioral disorders...that rate is more than three times the national average for black students and higher than any other state in the country" (para. 6). In the same article, African American youth account for 30 percent of students in the St. Paul School District but makeup two-thirds of it's Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD) program (Meitrodt, 2013, para. 28). The literature showed the high rate of which African American youth are placed in special education which suggests there is no effective strategy in place to prevent special education enrollment for African American students. This notion of an ineffective system was seen throughout the literature. Another article referred to repeated failure of African American students due to the same flawed system, "We're failing with 40, 50, 60 percent of our African American children, but we keep the system that turns out the same product, year after year" (Kersten, 2011, para 6). These ideas all tie to the theme that African American youth are victims of dysfunctional school systems as evidenced by references to schools failing African American youth,

disproportionate disciplinary actions or overrepresentation of African American youth in special education programs.

*Criminal justice systems.* The researcher noticed repeated references to African American youth and their interactions with the criminal justice system throughout the literature. When phrases about disproportionate arrest and law violations appeared and incarceration rates for African American youth, the researcher coded these as African American youth as victims of the dysfunctional criminal justice system. In a *Star Tribune* article from 2015, a law professor points out the flaws in the current justice system that negatively impacts African American youth, "crimes like lurking 'gives officers the power to stop, question, and harass young African American men in the city of Minneapolis'" (Golden, para. 1). This is suggestive that there are laws that exist that give reason to why the justice system reports disproportionate arrest rates of African American youth. The discourse provided evidence of the high rate of African American youth being labeled as offenders. Lemagie (2008) described juvenile offenders as "a group that includes far too many young black men" (para. 7). This portrays African American youth as being cited for violations or committing crimes at higher rates but what this type of information does not discern is whether or not African American youth actually violate laws at higher rates than other racial groups or if they are just caught or sought out for violations more frequently than other groups of youth.

The literature also suggested the alternative for youth who don't succeed in school systems is the criminal justice system. An article published in the *Star Tribune* August of 2014 linked school failure for African American youth and the pipeline to prison, stating that they were destined to a "lifelong involvement with law enforcement, justice,

corrections and social service-service agencies" ("Schools Attend", para. 11). While this quote supports that African American youth are victims of failing school systems, it also suggests they will be subjected to a justice system that will also fail them instead of positively altering their trajectory in society. Statistics present in the literature articulated the disproportionate incarceration rates for uneducated African American youth as well, stating, "a third of all young black noncollege men were incarcerated." (Anonymous, 2010, para. 16). The criminal justice system does not treat African American youth fairly, and early involvement in the criminal justice system sets the stage for continued involvement rather than prevention for African American youth.

*Social Service systems.* The researcher encountered references in the literature that depict African American youth as victims of various social service systems that pertain to supportive and preventative social services. References such as living in poverty and disproportionate representation in child protection systems reflect this theme. According to Rosenblum (2011), African American youth experience the fifth-highest poverty rate..."this comes as budgets for social services, including mental-health resources and young-parent programs, are being cut to the bone or eliminated" (para.9). This suggests that African American youth's overall well-being is suffering because there is a lack of funding for services to aid them. This becomes problematic for African American youth because although the discourse suggests services are being eliminated, there is no evidence that the demand for social services by African American youth has decreased. Another article discussed that "more than half of 3-and 4-year olds are not attending preschool, and numbers are even higher for children of color" (Schmidt, 2014, para. 10). The also asserted the demand and need of the child-care subsidy system and

early education programs by minority groups are not being met (Schmidt, 2014, para. 10). If the system cannot meet the demand of African American families, the families are not being served.

The researcher also encountered references in the literature that depict African American youth as victims of various social service systems that relate to treatment and social control vein such as child protection. The discourse highlighted the idea that social services disproportionately involve African American children and their families. An article by Stahl (2015) criticizes the child protection system and its response to child protection cases as evidenced by the “disproportionate number of African-American...children in the system and the failure to respond when those children are abused” (para. 12). This idea posits that social service systems that should be protecting African American youth are actually creating more hardships and failing to protect and serve them.

The portrayal of African American youth as victims of dysfunctional systems and being failed to be served, protected or aided by schools, social services and the criminal justice system appeared at various times in the discourse. This idea relates to the concept of institutional betrayal which posits “wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution” (Freyd, 2016, para. 1). The discourse provided evidence that the systems that are in place are ineffective and at times, may do more harm than good for African American youth. This reinforces the idea that systems such as schools, the criminal justice system and social services systems may be betraying those they are set out to serve and adding to the turmoil this population faces. African American youth will continue to be disadvantaged until these systems undergo reform.

Compared to the other categories, the portrayal of African American youth as positive and weak was not as prevalent in the discourse; it was the third most prevalent portrayal which suggests society's lack of knowledge of how frequently African American youth are victims of dysfunctional systems and the impact these dysfunctional systems have on this population.

### **Positive and Strong**

Within the category of positive and powerful, African American youth were presented as resilient and successful and as the focus of change efforts. The theme of resilient and successful was formed by codes related to African American youth as participants in school and community and academic progress. The theme focus of change efforts was derived from references of African American youth being the focus of positive programs and services. This was the least common portrayal of African American youth throughout the discourse.

**Resilient and successful.** Throughout the literature African American youth are portrayed as resilient and successful. There were two main codes that allude to this theme: *participants in school and community* and *academic progress*. Whenever the discourse suggested that African American students were participating in school or community events, or acting as leaders in their school or community, the researcher coded it as *participants in school and community*.

McKinny (2014) provides an example of African American youth participating in local community events such as a leadership summit and other positive events at the local library (para. 28). Another article highlighted African American youth participating in community meetings and sharing their ideas and "visions for a better city" (Melo, 2014,

13). African American youth were portrayed not only as leaders in their communities but also as participating in programs and community events. Pfitzinger (2009) highlights African American youth's participation in "Project SPIRIT, a daily after school tutorial and cultural enrichment program for African-American students" (para. 1). These references were made in the context of the strength and potential African American students possess and display in community and academic settings. An article by Kersten (2011) noted African American students saying, "We are boys striving to be great men" (para. 16). These references allude to the codes of African American youth as *participants in school and community* and relate to the theme of resilient and successful.

When the researcher came across content that suggested African American students were academically successful or overcoming previous educational obstacles, this was coded as *academic progress*. An article by Pfitzinger (2009) quoted a lead teacher talking about his work with elementary students at Obama Service Learning Elementary in St. Paul, "we're building their confidence so they know they can be successful" (para. 3). In the same article, African American students were shown to "have exceeded those goals for academics, attendance and social behavior" (Pfitzinger, 2009, para. 7). These portrayals draw attention to positive aspects and performance of African American youth and suggest they are capable of overcoming obstacles to be successful.

**Focus of change efforts.** The text depicts African American youth as the focus of change efforts on several occasions. This theme was derived when the researcher came across content that described a specific focus on working with African American youth, for example, "focusing on young black males is essential" ("Schools Attend", 2014, para. 7) or when they were the focus of advocacy services (Melo, 2013, para. 26) or targets of

job training programs ("Still, the gap", 2013, para. 26). An article by Brandt (2014) describes a young student who is "part of the most ambitious effort yet to improve the academic achievement and economic fortunes of African-American children" (para. 2). Such references support the idea that African American youth are portrayed in the two selected newspapers as the focus of change efforts.

One of the ways African American youth are portrayed is positive and strong which aligns with Schneider and Ingram's theory of social construction of target populations (1993). Within this category, the theme of resilient and successful was evident. African American youth as participants in schools and community and academic progress were concepts that appeared often in the literature that contributed to the theme of resilient and successful. African American youth as the focus of change efforts also appeared in the literature and contributed to the theme. These portrayals shed light on the positive aspects of African American youth and the ways they positively engage and participate in society. Compared to the other categories, the portrayal of African American youth as positive and strong was the least common among the discourse which suggests that society does not view African American youth as strong individuals and doesn't value the knowledge they may bring to the table.

### **Discussion**

This research reviewed written media from *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and *St. Paul Pioneer Press* newspapers to answer the question of how African American youth are portrayed in local, mainstream, newspapers. The textual analysis brought attention to six major themes or ways that African American youth are portrayed in the discourse.



Schneider and Ingram's (1993) theory of social construction of target populations states that populations fall into four categories of constructions: contenders (negative and strong) and deviants (negative and weak) dependents (positive and weak) and advantaged (positive and strong). When applying Schneider and Ingram's (1993) theory out of context, groups or individuals fit into these four categories as outlined above, however, when examining groups or individuals in context or with a view of the bigger picture, it is possible that they may fit in other categories within the theory. For example, Schneider and Ingram (1993) categorize criminals as deviants (negative and weak). When examining the text and considering the stories they are presented in, they are quite powerful and therefore, can also be considered contenders (negative and powerful).

### **Portrayals as "Contenders": Negative and Strong**

This portrayal is based on stories where African American youth are portrayed as drug dealers, gang members, or as having involvement in the criminal justice system. Such instances place blame on the individual for their own misfortunes and negative outcomes. This portrayal of youth in the text aligns with the negative portrayal of African Americans in the literature suggesting society holds a powerful stigma and stereotype about this population that reinforces social control. Although literature suggests African Americans are disciplined in school and incarcerated at a significantly higher percentage than White individuals, there is also evidence supporting the notion that the African American population is not disproportionately misbehaving at higher rates. It is possible that because this is the most common belief and portrayal of this population, although it may be inaccurate, it limits society's ability to change its perspective and replace views with other portrayals, thus perpetuating the negative image.

**Portrayals as "Deviants": Negative and Weak**

This portrayal is based on stories where African American youth are portrayed as being individually responsible or blamed for their poor test scores, grades, behavior and other negative outcomes. Additionally, this portrayal commonly suggests that African American youth are inferior to Whites because of their less successful outcomes.

There were several instances in the text where African American youth were compared to Whites as being of lesser standing or well-being. For example, articles reported White's as having higher graduation rates compared to African Americans, or experiencing poverty less frequently than African Americans. This seemingly common practice of comparing the two groups, while highlighting benchmarks, may perpetuate a belief or reinforce a current stereotype that all Whites fare well and all African Americans fare poorly in comparison: that somehow African Americans are inferior to Whites.

**Portrayals as "Dependents": Positive and Weak**

This category is created by instances where the story depicted youth in the position of a victim or doing poorly because of the power of larger systems; negative outcomes are not their fault but those of these systems. This reveals that current systems have victimized or been unfair to African American youth which has led to poor outcomes for them. The systems become the villain rather than the individual.

This portrayal is one of the least common found throughout this study, however there is evidence suggesting this may be changing. The media has recently given a lot of attention to events such as the Black Lives Matter protests that have occurred across the Twin Cities in the last year. People are standing together in effort to hold failing systems

accountable for the negative outcomes of African American youth. This type of action or pushing back is powerful in changing the messages of societal responsibility (rather than personal) and the ways that African Americans are viewed by society.

### **Portrayals as "Advantaged": Positive and Strong**

This category is made up of instances where the story showed that individuals and groups of African American youth are responsible for their successful outcomes, resiliency, and being positive members of their community. Unfortunately, this was the least common portrayal of African American youth. This is significant because it suggests that society does not yet view African American youth as an advantaged population despite evidence in the text that African American youth are just as powerful capable of success as other population groups. These positive accounts of African American youth endorse the belief that they can achieve success on their own despite all the negative portrayals of systems negatively impacting them.

This portrayal, although the least common, may be the most important because it suggests that society's view may be shifting or that it should be shifting towards a more positive view of African American youth. The positive portrayals provide evidence that society may be becoming more aware of the hardships African American youth have faced in the past due to the newspaper's accounts of their successes and positive involvement within their communities. It's possible that this portrayal of African American youth will create more awareness and activity around supporting them in being successful and finding ways to remove barriers.

**Implications for Social Work**

When considering future social work research, one may focus on the African American community's response to the way they are portrayed. This would open the discussion about the accuracy of the portrayals or what the media's portrayal is lacking and in what ways the African American community would like to be viewed and understood. Additionally, this could motivate media outlets to alter their reporting or push the African American community, as well as social workers, to hold the media outlets accountable for their reporting styles and subjects. This provides an opportunity for social workers to stand with the African American community in order to promote change. This could also raise awareness about the inaccuracies of the media's portrayals, the dysfunctional systems that disproportionately target African Americans and could lead to programs and policies being redefined to better serve the African American community.

Examining the portrayal of African Americans in other regions of the country may also be beneficial to the field of social work research because of the variety of cultures and how those cultures live and treat those around them. If portrayals of African Americans differ vastly in various areas of the country, this could result in different regions or states implementing a more focused policy to improve the portrayal and everyday lives of African Americans. This is also relevant to social workers who may seek work in new or different parts of the country because they will need to know how this community is accepted, rejected and portrayed and what areas of improvement they can assist with.

It is important for social workers to have an understanding around how various populations are portrayed and what impact those portrayals have on those populations and society as a whole. Once an understanding is established, social workers can fulfill their responsibility to promote social justice, advocate for policy change that supports human dignity and upholds the values of the social work profession.

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### Appendix

*Star Tribune* and *Pioneer Press* Newspaper articles used in the discourse analysis

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