

Satire, Race, and Modern Cartoons: Boondocks vs. South Park

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Satire is primarily seen in literary form where irony, sarcasm and ridicule are used in order to expose, or denounce vice or folly with the intent of shaming individuals, and society itself, into improvement. In addition to satire as a literary genre, we have seen an increase in the use of satire in American television as well. Popular cartoons such as the Simpsons, Family Guy, South Park, and the Boondocks are known to have created controversy through episodes that feature satire on political, social, and racial issues. While all four of these cartoons have satirical content, the Boondocks and South Park dedicate the majority of their satire each episode toward one main issue. It would be interesting to see if (1) there are racial differences between how whites and blacks view both shows and (2) if the satire featured in these two shows actually exposes society's foolishness, possibly leading to improvement. It is our hypothesis that through social identification theory, groups will be made through the similarity of race (Tajfel, 1982). This will allow for those who identify with either race, to feel more positively toward the show of their own race.

Comedy Central's *South Park* is a satirical, animated show, made for mature audiences created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone. Although the show is thought by some to be incredibly offensive, the creators explain that there is an underlying moral lesson. The show follows four characters that live in the fictional predominantly white town of South Park, Colorado. Eric Cartman, the racist, self-absorbed, schemer of the group often proves to be the show's antagonist. Stan Marsh, the show's protagonist, is one of the more normal characters in the show, and tends to be the voice of reason in his group of friends. Kyle Broflovski is Stan's best friend, and Eric's biggest enemy. He tends to be made fun

of because he is Jewish. The last main character, Kenny McCormick, is the poorest of the group, and throughout the first few seasons of *South Park*, he would die nearly every episode. The show follows them during their crazy adventures, as they navigate through elementary school.

On the other hand *the Boondocks* is a satirical, animated show created by Aaron McGruder and based mainly on African American culture and race relations. The show highlights the Freeman family after they recently moved from the Southside of Chicago to Woodcrest, a suburb which they refer to as the slang term, “the Boondocks”. The family consists of ten-year-old Huey Freeman, protagonist and revolutionary, eight-year-old Riley Freeman, antagonist and avid follower of American hip-hop culture, and Robert Freeman aka granddad, legal guardian and upholder of the beliefs of an African American from the older generation.

Moral Lesson

Although there seems to be an underlying moral lesson in both shows (provided by the shows protagonists Huey and Stan) the reality construction created by *South Park* and *the Boondocks* may differ amongst black and white viewers, or may not be present at all. It is thought that perceived realism, identification, and wishful identification can influence and even predict post-viewing behavior (Austin, Nass & Roberts, 1990). Theory also suggests that it is more likely for television images to be incorporated into images of social reality and acted upon if they are perceived as more realistic (Feshbach, 1927; Reeves, 1978).

The reality testing process includes the idea of the television viewer making comparisons with several referents while watching the shows. As said by Hawkins & Pinigree (1982), viewers are “relatively rational” and may even have “an awareness of balancing information” when determining the realism of television content. In the *South Park* survey we focused on friends as a referent and in *the Boondocks* we focused on family as a referent. This would allow for viewers to use their own family/friends as a reference group or the television portrayed friends/family as a referent. Austin, Roberts, & Nass (1990) suggest that the comparison of televisions reality with one’s own reality predicts perceived realism.

Identification and character wishful identification is seen as how much the viewer wants to be like the characters on television or emulate the situations created on television. It is shown that the more children desire to “be like” a television character the more elements of the television show are likely to be incorporated into the child’s reality construction (Reeves & Garramone, 1982). It is our thought that the same can be said for a viewers desire to “be like” *the Boondocks* family or “be like” the *South Park* group of friends. We believe that race will enhance a viewer’s reality construction causing viewers to identify more strongly to shows about their own race.

Method

A total of 67 participants who identified themselves as either “Black/African American” or “White/Caucasian” were randomly assigned to complete one of two surveys. One survey required each participant to view two predetermined episodes of the *Boondocks* while the other survey required each participant to view

predetermined episodes of South Park. For each of the two shows, one of the episodes covered a race sensitive issue. One of which being the Boondocks 'Return of the King', an episode featuring Martin Luther King's return and the other being South Park's "With Apologies to Jessie Jackson", an episode highlighting the power of the N word. The other episode featured obesity, which is largely seen as a non-race sensitive issue. We see race issues in the Boondocks through the viewing of "The Itis" and in South Park's "Fat Camp" episode.

Viewers were then immediately prompted to answer an online survey with questions to assess perceived realism, perceived similarity, and wishful identification. There were also questions on adjectives that would describe the shows character in an attempt to assess viewer opinion on character admiration, intelligence, success, and perceived similarity.

Measures (10 scale)

Perceived realism was assessed with the question, "The Boondocks family/South Park friends are like most real family/friends"... [strongly disagree; strongly agree]. Perceived similarity was assessed with the question, "*The Boondocks* family/*South Park* friends are like my own real family/friends"...[strongly disagree; strongly agree]. Identification was assessed with the question, "I would like to be one of the Boondocks/South Park children"...[strongly disagree; strongly agree]. Wishful identification, the respondents desire to be like the favorite character was assessed with the questions: "I would like to do the same things as my favorite character"; "He or she

is the sort of person I want to be like myself”; “I wish I could be more like my favorite character” ...[strongly disagree; strongly agree].

Character traits were assessed and defined by the following adjectives.... admiration [receives approval; well liked; gets support from others; respected by others]; intelligence [smart; stupid; intelligent]; success [achieves goals; gets what he wants; successful] and perceived similarity [is like me; different from me; doesn't behave like me; thinks like me].

Results

In both the Boondocks and South Park measures of perceived realism, similarity and wishful identification were checked for racial differences amongst whites and African American's. The characters were also assessed for measures of admiration, intelligence, success, and perceived similarity.

Perceived Similarity

There was a significant difference in the white scores ($M=2.36$, $SD=1.75$) and black scores ($M=4.00$ $SD=2.83$) conditions; $t(16.4)=-1.93$, $p= .074$ related to perceived similarity in the case of the Boondocks. These results support our initial hypothesis that suggests that African Americans identify more strongly to the predominantly African American show the Boondocks. Consequently blacks feel like the Boondocks family is more like their own family significantly more than white people. On the contrary, there were no significant racial differences related to perceived similarity and South Park.

Perceived Realism

There were significant differences in terms of perceived realism when it came to the South Park friends shown by white scores ($M= 3.00$, $SD= 2.17$) and black scores ($M=5.55$, $SD=2.62$) conditions; $t(24)= -2.71$ $p= .012$. It is surprising that black people felt the South Park friends are like most real friends significantly more than white people. This goes against our idea that white people would identify more strongly with the predominantly white show, South Park.

Wishful Identification

We also see a significant difference in wishful identification for white scores ($M=2.93$, $SD=1.99$) and black scores ($M=5.77$, $SD=2.68$) conditions; $t(39)= -3.79$ $p=.001$. As suspected these results suggest that African Americans want to be like one of the Boondocks characters significantly more than whites do. However it is not the case that white people want to be like one of the South Park children significantly more than African Americans. In fact with white scores ($M= 2.93$, $SD= 2.58$) and black scores ($M=2.00$, $SD=1.27$) illustrate that neither group wants to be like the South Park children.

The main characters in the Boondocks and South Park were also measured for admiration, intelligence, level of success, and perceived similarity. All of these measures have been present in identification and can also be seen as a predictor of wishful identification (Hoffner, 2006).

Character Admiration

A significant difference is seen in the Boondocks measures of admiration for Riley as seen from white scores ($M=6.42$, $SD=1.88$) and black scores ($M=4.32$, $SD=1.94$) conditions; $t(39)=-3.27$ $p = .002$. These results show that in the Boondocks African Americans find that Riley is significantly more admirable on the show than whites think he is. However, there were no significant differences in measures amongst blacks and whites of admiration and the other Boondocks characters, Huey and Grandad.

South Park had significant differences in measures of admiration for Stan, white scores ($M=5.27$, $SD=2.34$) black score ($M=6.98$, $SD=1.81$) conditions; $t(24)= -2.02$ $p=.055$; admiration for Kyle, white score ($M= 4.95$, $SD=2.09$) black score ($M=6.32$, $SD=.956$) conditions; $t(24)=-2.02$ $p=.055$; and admiration for Kenny white scores ($M=3.42$, $SD=1.60$) black scores ($M=6.11$, $SD= 1.85$) conditions; $t(24)=-3.98$ $p=.001$. African Americans admire Stan, Kyle, and Kenny significantly more than their white counterparts.

Character intelligence

None of the characters on either the Boondocks or South Park were found to be significantly more intelligent to either of the races.

Character Success

In the Boondocks a significant difference is seen in the Boondocks measures of character success for Riley as seen from white scores ($M=4.58$, $SD=1.46$) and black scores ($M=5.46$, $SD=1.70$) conditions $t(39)=-1.69$; $p=.099$. This shows that black people thought of Riley as more successful on the Boondocks than white people.

In regards to South Park, a significant difference was seen in measures of character success in Stan, Cartman, and Kyle. We see these significant differences in Stan with white scores (M=4.50, SD=2.10) and black scores (M=6.68, SD=1.69) conditions; $t(24) = -2.83$ $p = .009$; Cartman success whites scores (M=5.16, SD=1.69), black scores (M=6.48, SD=2.15) conditions; $t(24) = -1.77$ $p = .090$; Kyle success white scores (M=4.71, SD=1.55), black scores (M=6.00, SD=1.24) conditions; $t(24) = -2.27$ $p = .032$. Black people found all three characters from South Park to be significantly more successful than white people found them to be.

Perceived Similarity of the Characters

There were no significant differences in perceived similarity between blacks and whites and any of the Boondocks characters. However there were significant differences between blacks and whites in measures of perceived similarity with Stan from South Park with white scores (M=4.95, SD=.969) black scores (M=5.59, SD=.752) conditions; $t(24) = -1.82$ $p = .081$. In other words, black people found themselves to be more similar or more “like” Stan than white people did.

Discussion

This analysis illustrates that African American’s have a more positive feeling for their own race and a more positive feeling toward the characters of both shows in general. These positive feelings toward the Boondocks and its characters can be explained with the fact that African American’s associate with the predominantly African American Boondocks show. Social identification theory refers to the process of locating oneself within a system of self categorizations that is used to define him or herself and others

(Tajfel, 1982). We expect race to be a determinant of social identity and therefore would expect to see a positive outlook through 'in-group bias'. In-group bias refers to the members in a particular group, in this case racial group, significantly favoring members inside the group over members that are outside the group (Tajfel, 1982).

What was surprising were the lack of significant differences in positive feelings of whites toward South Park and its characters, a show of their own race. It was also surprising that it was the African American's and not the whites that had a significantly higher positive outlook towards South Park and it's characters. The whites lack of identification toward South Park show is possibly a result of cognitive dissonance. This is the idea that people cannot feel two conflicting ideas at the same time and as a result change their attitudes or beliefs to justify one thought over the other. An example of this would be viewers experiencing the satirical and negative portrayals of those in South Park while at the same time understanding the conflicting protagonist's moral message. Instead of changing one's attitudes to agree with the protagonist, Stan, one might look for ways to discredit him (e.g. perceive him as less admirable, less successful, and or less similar). The show as a whole may also be discredited to match attitudes, beliefs, or ideals.

Perhaps this is where the controversy lies in satire. People may not necessarily want to believe that problematic issues need to be addressed or solved because of their own self-held conflicting ideals.

Further Research

Although this study has produced significant results there is still more that can be found. It would interesting to compare measures of character admiration, intelligence,

success, and perceived similarity for significant differences between character admiration, intelligence, success, and perceived similarity within shows in addition to whether there were significant differences amongst the two races as well. It would be especially interesting to see whether the measures of character traits were significantly different between characters deemed the protagonist and antagonist of each show. It is my guess that the differences in character traits between protagonist and antagonist are significantly different in all categories except perceived similarity.

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