

Bringing Race into “White” Television: The Quest for Colorconsciousness from Colorblindness

Evan Stewart

Abstract

*This article examines American minority sitcoms from a sociological perspective. Specifically, it explores the concept of colorblindness to gain insight into the relative lack of successful minority sitcoms which focus on race. To do this, it first defines the sociological theories at play: colorblindness, colorconsciousness, and the “whitewashing” of sitcoms. It then analyzes past trends in black and Asian-American sitcoms in the context of colorblindness, in conjunction with a sociological overview of American race dynamics in the country over the same time period. Following that, it compares those shows to the new sitcoms *Fresh off the Boat* and *black-ish*, which seem to have had success in addressing race so far. It attributes the success of these new shows to their ability to blend racial aspects and conversations with typical “white” situations in order to make the racial aspects more palatable to white audiences. Finally, it suggests that these shows’ successful formula may be imitated by more shows to help American society move from colorblindness to colorconsciousness.*

Introduction

Frank Parrish. Roc Emerson. Margaret Kim. These names are not as easily recognizable as Cliff Huxtable, J.J. Evans, or Will Smith, but all six were characters on sitcoms featuring predominantly non-white casts. The difference between the two groups is that the first three characters were all on shows that frequently attempted to address issues of race, while the second group’s shows generally avoided race, and fell more in line as “typical” sitcoms for the time. All three shows in the first group (*Frank’s Place*, *Roc*, and *All-American Girl*) failed to last longer than a season or two, while those in the second group (*The Cosby Show*, *Good Times*, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*) were all quite successful, each lasting at least six seasons.

This pattern of American minority sitcoms doing poorly if they focus on race has been generally consistent for the last sixty years of television history. It is best traced by Davis Monroe III, whose categorization of historic sitcoms I will return to and elaborate on later. Racial sociologists have proposed numerous theories about why this pattern is so consistently the case, often citing discrimination in the industry. One potential culprit is the

sociological phenomenon of colorblindness, a concept popularized by Dr. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Professor of Sociology at Duke University. In this phenomenon, members of a country's most privileged race (e.g. white Americans) do not recognize that race is still an issue, and so they often do not discuss it or work to improve race issues. More frequently, critics of colorblindness like Bonilla-Silva mention it in the context of Civil Rights, but some writers, like David Marcus of *The Federalist*, bring it into analyses of the entertainment industry. However, when they do discuss it in entertainment, they usually examine films or television dramas, rather than sitcoms. This is significant, because in American culture, comedy and satire has proven one of the most successful methods of social and political change, stemming back to the political cartoons used to curb corruption in major cities in the late nineteenth century. Based on this potential, I think it is critical to examine the racial sociological trends in American sitcoms. I believe that colorblindness is key to understanding these patterns that have controlled the face of television sitcoms. In the past, societal "colorblindness" has prevented minority sitcoms from successfully addressing race, both by preventing race-based shows (especially with Asian casts) from airing at all, and by generating opposition to discussing race on these shows from colorblind viewers. Thus, in this article, I want to open up the concept of sociological colorblindness to investigate the absence of successful sitcoms confronting race.

Recently, the traditional pattern of race-avoidance has been shifting, as there have been several successful sitcoms which attempt to tackle race, such as *black-ish* and *Fresh off the Boat*. I will also explore what it is about these shows that allows them to break the mold of minority sitcoms. Ultimately, after comparing these new shows to a sociological examination of past minority shows, I assert that the recent success of shows like *Fresh off the Boat* and *black-ish* stems from their ability to take fairly typical "white" circumstances and build on them by incorporating unique racial aspects in the show. Finding ways to eliminate apathy towards racial issues is one of racial sociology's largest goals, and examining these recent sitcom successes in addressing race, comparing them to past failures, and addressing why there have been relatively few successes will hopefully present a template for continued success in confronting issues of race in sitcoms, which could be applied to other facets of life as well.

Colorblindness, Colorconsciousness, and “White” Sitcom Situations

To examine the phenomenon of colorblindness in the context of television, it is first necessary to present the concept in general. For a description of it, I will primarily draw from one of the seminal books about colorblindness, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. In introducing the concept, which he refers to as “colorblind racism,” Bonilla-Silva first discusses how very few modern Americans explicitly consider themselves racists. He asserts that, instead, most whites feel that modern America is a “post-racial” society, in which people look beyond color. This line of thought can be traced back to Dr. Martin Luther King's “I Have a Dream” speech, in which he articulated his vision of a world wherein people were not judged by race. The problem with this philosophy, according to Bonilla-Silva, is that we are not yet in this post-racial world; there are still numerous issues of racial inequality in America and ignoring race allows them to go unchecked. Bonilla-Silva goes on to contend, in perhaps his heaviest charge, that “most whites insist that minorities (especially blacks) are responsible for whatever ‘race problem’ we have in this country,” by promoting “racially divisive programs, such as affirmative action,” when, in reality, these programs are necessary to curb the vast inequality still extant in American society (1).

Overall, then, racial colorblindness is culturally reinforced ignorance of the plight of minorities. Critics charge it with allowing income disparity and racism in law enforcement to continue, and possibly worsen. As Dr. Kristin Haltinner, a sociology professor at the University of Minnesota, suggests in her book *Teaching Race and Anti-Racism in Contemporary America: Adding Context to Colorblindness*, although many white Americans viewed the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 as the official end of American racism, the number of racial hate crimes actually went up significantly the next year (2). For reasons like these, the colorblind perspective is discredited by a number of sociologists who suggest that we are not beyond racism or inequality yet. Nonetheless, the idea is still an extremely popular one, especially among white Americans, but also among members of other races. It is this prevalence, combined with the fact that it arrived in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, that make it fit perfectly in the pattern of television that does not seek to address race.

As far as the acting industry is concerned, some people feel that colorblindness has helped minorities achieve more roles. David Marcus, a writer for *The Federalist*, contends in his article "The Case for Colorblind Casting," that there are two different types of scripts in Hollywood- those in which race makes a difference to the plot, and all other scripts, which make up the vast majority. He asserts that, in the second category, race should not be a factor at all in deciding who gets a role. This has been the case in an increasing number of movies and television series; Marcus points out that the next James Bond is rumored to be black. In this sense, then, people can argue that colorblindness is a positive occurrence in entertainment, as it has allowed for more minorities to gain acting work. But Jason Smith, a George Mason Ph.D. student, presents a more nuanced view in his article, "Between Colorblind and Colorconscious: Hollywood Films and Struggles over Racial Consciousness." Smith agrees that there has been an increase in minority actors in films, but he believes that the colorblind nature of their roles propagates the inequality of American society, much like colorblindness does in the real world. He says that the real gains in racial equality to be made from this development come from how "the perspectives that Black actors and actresses bring to the table play a role in shifting how that order is presented," (780). Smith asserts that, in this way, more minority leads are able to start moving the film industry towards the sociological construct he refers to as "colorconsciousness." He defines colorconsciousness as the opposite of colorblindness, in which discussing race is the norm rather than the exception. While Smith's analysis focuses on the film industry, I believe that his theories apply to minority sitcoms as well; colorblindness seems to have been the dominant force on minority sitcoms through most of American television's history, and a few current sitcoms appear to be helping the genre move towards colorconsciousness.

Another oft-cited criticism of minority television shows, which goes hand-in-hand with colorblindness, is that many of them simply place their own race's characters into typically "white" situations. By this, critics usually mean that these shows take traditional sitcom setups, which, since the majority of American sitcoms have predominantly white casts, have come to be associated primarily with the white narrative. One noteworthy example of a "white" situation is having a wealthy set of main characters with lucrative careers, such as doctors or lawyers. These sorts of circumstances are perceived as "white" because, throughout early American television, most white sitcoms tended to have white-

collar characters. Critics contend that shows which do this sidestep race and ignore the traditions of the minority in the show, contributing to a “whitewashing” of American culture. This concept is key in relation to colorblind sitcoms, because past shows which have incorporated this typical “whiteness” were generally the same ones that promoted colorblindness by choosing not to discuss race.

Trends in Black Sitcoms

In order to view the effect that colorblindness has had on television, I will outline the pattern that minority sitcoms have generally taken over the last sixty years. To do this, I will primarily draw from Davis Monroe III’s analysis, “A Time to Laugh: Black TV Sitcoms and Their Influence on the Black Family, 1951-1992.” Monroe specifically examines and contrasts black sitcoms in three different decades: the 1950s, 1970s, and 1980s. In his analysis, each of these decades was significant for portraying a different image of blacks on television. The 1950s had the first few black sitcoms, most notably *Amos and Andy*, which “depended on black people looking foolish for mainstream amusement,” (2). In short, they reinforced the negative pre-Civil Rights Movement stereotypes prominent in America at that time.

Monroe then examines the 1970s, focusing on how many black shows at this time, such as *Good Times*, put blacks in low-income situations. It is also important, though, to recognize that the 70s, coming on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, was the one period in which shows were somewhat successful at bringing up race, as noted by *Huffington Post* journalists Brennan Williams and Gazelle Emami in their article, “How to Make it as a Black Sitcom: Be Careful How You Talk About Race.” However, shows from this period which did address race, such as *The Jeffersons* and *Sanford and Son*, often backed away from it after the first few seasons, and focused on becoming typical sitcoms, rather than social commentaries. In the 1980s, this move away from race issues became even clearer with the advent of *The Cosby Show*, one of the most successful black sitcoms of all time. Its success fit the pattern described at the outset of this paper; *The Cosby Show* almost never brought up race. The 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s followed this trend as well, actually exhibiting an overall decline in the frequency of black sitcoms. Surprisingly, though, the pattern does not

seem to have continued into the 2010s, which have not only experienced a sudden resurgence in sitcoms starring minorities, but in those which address race.

By examining twentieth century racial sociological trends, we can see that the pre-2010 sitcom patterns fit clearly into the changing perceptions of race in American society. The racist stereotypes in 1950s black sitcoms were in keeping with the racism and inequality of the era. After the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s came the relative rise in social awareness of the early 1970s, with shows like *The Jeffersons*. However, the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement faded by the end of that decade, and this was when the concept of colorblindness began to take root. Many white Americans stopped discussing race, figuring that it was mostly an issue of the past, and that continuing to talk about it would simply create more issues. It makes sense that those people who did not want to discuss race (many of whom comprised a key American television demographic) would also not want the sitcoms they watch to openly confront issues of race. This explains why, in the 1980s, which saw some of the most successful black sitcoms of all time, like *The Cosby Show*, none of the most successful black shows regularly discussed race, while those that did, like *Frank's Place*, rarely lasted more than a season or two. Colorblindness has remained a popular viewpoint since that time, which explains why that same trend of not discussing race has continued fairly consistently since the 1980s. What it does not explain is why, today, a colorconscious show like *black-ish* can suddenly succeed.

Asian-American Sitcoms

The story of Asian-American sitcoms is very different from that of black sitcoms, but it has followed the same pattern of colorblindness. Until the current decade, there had only ever been one Asian sitcom on prime-time American television, 1994's *All-American Girl*. The show, which tried to comically examine race by focusing on the tensions between main character Margaret Kim (played by Asian-American comedian Margaret Cho) and her traditionally "Asian" family, lasted only one season. In his article "*All-American Girl* at 20: The Evolution of Asian Americans on TV," critic E. Alex Jung traces patterns in Asian-American sitcom actors since *All-American Girl*'s cancellation. He lists a number of supporting Asian

cast members, as well as one new show, *The Mindy Project*. However, as Jung points out, none of these roles or shows regularly address race; rather they are propagations of colorblindness. *The Mindy Project* in particular has suffered numerous accusations of colorblindness. Mindy is the only main character of color, and as Jung points out, she “has only dated white men on the show.” *The Mindy Project* has been quite successful so far, and is currently in its fourth season. Thus, Asian-American sitcoms (as much as we can trace a trend with only two shows) have followed the same patterns as black sitcoms, with the colorblind show succeeding, and the race-topical show failing. However, just as that trend seems to have been broken for black sitcoms last year by *black-ish*, the Asian-American trend was likewise altered by the recent success of *Fresh off the Boat*.

Much like *black-ish*, *Fresh off the Boat*'s success has shown that it is possible for a colorconscious sitcom to succeed. What is it about *Fresh off the Boat* that allows it to address race so much more successfully than *All-American Girl* did? Part of the explanation could simply be that, twenty years later, people are beginning to move away from colorblindness, and are more willing to accept a race-oriented show. However, based on the racial sociological sitcom trends of the last decade, up until the advent of *black-ish* and *Fresh off the Boat*, it seems unlikely that a sudden societal shift has occurred on its own. Rather, I contend that the answer lies in how the new shows present more typical or “white” settings for their characters, use the familiarity afforded by those settings to make their incorporation of race more palatable for colorblind audiences, and in doing so move towards Smith's colorconsciousness.

All-American Girl vs. Fresh off the Boat and black-ish

To elucidate *Fresh off the Boat*'s successful formula, we can first examine *All-American Girl*'s failure. Fortunately, due to *All-American Girl*'s long-time status as the only Asian-American sitcom, there is extensive conversation about why it did not succeed. Professor Jane Chi Hyun Park, a specialist in Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney, suggests in her article, “The Failure of Asian American Representation in *All-American Girl* and *The Cho Show*,” that the show's shortcomings stemmed from “its contradictions around race, ethnicity, and gender,” and its poor handling of “assimilationist identity politics.” Similarly, Jung describes an “artificial wall” which separated Margaret's family from Margaret and

typical American society. Both authors, and many others, detail the show's inability to maturely address race. *All-American Girl* did not fail because it discussed race, but because it did so poorly, falling back on clichés and stereotypes for comedic effect instead of addressing the nuances and humanity of the Asian-American experience. Perhaps one of its problems was that it tried too hard not to be a typical "white" show, and in doing so reverted to simplistic caricatures.

I stated earlier that many minority television shows attract criticism for using typically "white" situations, as they tend to promote colorblindness. However, using such situations does not have to contribute to colorblindness. In fact, the idea of putting minority characters in white situations may be key to the success of colorconscious sitcoms. In discussing the faults of *All-American Girl*, Jung describes the show's largest missed opportunity to address race more effectively, saying, "There were setups that hinted at real possibility, at acknowledging the fact that everyone else in the family dealt with particularly American experiences." By making Margaret's family a collective stereotype, the writers missed a chance to make them connectable to a larger audience.

On the other hand, the concept of *Fresh off the Boat* is the story of the Asian-American Huang family trying to make their way in a predominantly white Orlando suburb. Thus, the three children and their father, Louis, often act in a way that can be considered typically white, with Louis as the owner of a steakhouse called *Cattleman's Ranch*. Although the family members often act "white," they are constantly reminded of their Chinese heritage by their mother, Jessica. However, Jessica does her share of assimilating as well, becoming a real estate agent and supporting Louis' entrepreneurial endeavor. In a sense, the two parents serve as juxtaposed pillars that work in tandem: Louis pushes the family to embrace the American dream, and Jessica tries to keep the family as Chinese as possible, but each one of them tempers the other, with Louis encouraging Jessica to be a little less traditional, and Jessica reigning Louis back a bit. This duality between the parents allows *Fresh off the Boat* to traverse typically "white" scenarios, while bringing in important aspects of Chinese culture. Additionally, the characters are relatable, because they act like real human beings, instead of one-dimensional stereotypes. I think that its ability to have relatable characters in situations that are familiar to white viewers makes it successful like colorblind shows such

as *The Cosby Show*, while its incorporation of Chinese elements allows it to take that accessibility and use it to show white American viewers the normality of another culture.

It becomes clear that the show has been altered from the real-life experiences it is based on in Eddie Huang's interview with *New York Times* reporter Wesley Yang, "Eddie Huang Against the World." Yang describes Huang's complaints that the show is not an accurate portrayal of his childhood, and that it has become too much like other sitcoms. In my mind, this is one of the show's strengths, because it has found a place where it can discuss race without being too much of a turnoff for typical colorblind audiences. As the show's executive producer, Melvin Mar, states in an interview with reporter Jon Caramanica, "We're not making a show for just Asian-Americans, we're making a show through the Asian-American point-of-view for everybody." In a sense, the success of the show stems from its ability to put an Asian-American lens through a typically "white" lens, and thus make it more applicable to the "everybody" Mar mentions.

The same successful recipe is evident in *black-ish*. Much like *The Cosby Show*, it focuses on a high-income black family, the Johnsons. However, *black-ish* is far more direct in addressing race, as suggested by the show's title. The general plot usually focuses on the father, Dre, worrying that he and his family are not acting "black" enough, and being tempered by his wife, Bow, and his children. This in itself is both a playful twist on the whitewashing of minority sitcoms and a way to introduce black culture into the show. Although the Johnson family home is the main setting, many of the show's most telling discussions of race occur at Dre's office, between himself, another black man, and two white men. His black coworker, Charlie, is a more extreme, bachelor version of Dre. Dre's boss, Mr. Stevens, is a typical, somewhat conservative middle-aged white man who is out of touch with the issue of race. The other coworker, Josh, is a young white man who believes he is an expert on black culture, although he usually just presents uninformed stereotypes. Through characters like these, and the Johnsons' interactions with them, the show pokes gentle fun at white misconceptions of black culture. One of the keys to handling this successfully is that the Johnsons are put in a somewhat "white" situation, living in a predominantly upper-class neighborhood with both parents in white-collar jobs (a doctor and an advertising executive). This makes the show more palatable for white audiences who would normally not watch it, and again lends it a greater chance to discuss race.

There are clear commonalities between *Fresh off the Boat* and *black-ish* beyond the fact that both are successful, colorconscious shows. Both shows have one parent (Jessica and Dre) determined to preserve the traditions of their own race as much as possible, and one (Louis and Bow) who try to embrace the typical American lifestyle, regardless of its perceived “whiteness.” In both shows, each parent reels the other in a bit, and both end up taking portions of both cultures. In a way, the two different parents represent the duality of these shows, which keep one foot safely in the context of traditional “white” sitcoms and the other in their racial identity. Just as both parents’ styles are necessary for the families to function, these shows seem to need both components to successfully make a statement about race.

Conclusion

Both *black-ish* and *Fresh off the Boat* aired on the same network in the same season, and it does not seem to be a coincidence. Rather, I think it is because the writers at ABC Studios have finally found a winning formula which allows them to bring up race and still get high ratings. Since the success of these two shows, several others with the potential to discuss race have also developed, such as *Dr. Ken* and *Master of None*. It remains to be seen whether these and other shows will use the so-far-successful formula of taking a minority show, making the characters’ circumstances seem somewhat white to ease it into the public’s view, and then using the show to discuss race. If this formula does prove applicable to other television shows, it will hopefully help bring colorconsciousness into the American mainstream. Furthermore, if it is successful, it could signify an important sociological phenomenon lending more palatability to racial dialogues, which in turn may bring important changes to other aspects of American culture.

In the meantime, there is still an abundance of writing to be done on this subject. In limiting the scope of my paper, I had to leave out numerous other important parts of the conversation. For example, I have not analyzed trends in the sitcom portrayals of other races, such as Hispanics, who have followed a very unique course in television. Sociological sitcom trends in addressing other identifying groups, such as gender, class, or sexuality, could also be added to the discussion. Another possibility for further analysis is the effect that having

minority sitcom writers write shows based on their own racial experiences has on the reception of colorconscious shows.

With further research like this, perhaps we can find an even clearer formula for sitcoms to become successfully colorconscious. Certainly, it will also be critical to keep monitoring *black-ish* and *Fresh off the Boat* to see if they continue to be sociologically relevant.

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