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# Seeing the unseen: Underrepresented groups in prime-time television

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# Seeing the unseen: Underrepresented groups in prime-time television

## Abstract

Television is considered America's No. 1 pastime, occupying an average of four hours and 39 minutes of a person's time every day (Stelter, 2008). A majority of viewers are tuned in during prime time to live vicariously through their favorite fictional characters who reflect friends, family or even themselves. However, is prime-time television really representing everyone? The purpose of this study is to discover whether a media format as influential as TV reflects the people of the United States. This will be accomplished through coding the prime-time programing on major broadcast networks ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox and the CW.

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Seeing the Unseen: Underrepresented Groups in Prime-Time Television

Cherese E. Colston

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## **Abstract**

Television is considered America's No. 1 pastime, occupying an average of four hours and 39 minutes of a person's time every day (Stelter, 2008). A majority of viewers are tuned in during prime time to live vicariously through their favorite fictional characters who reflect friends, family or even themselves. However, is prime-time television really representing everyone? The purpose of this study is to discover whether a media format as influential as TV reflects the people of the United States. This will be accomplished through coding the prime-time programing on major broadcast networks ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox and the CW.

*Keywords: underrepresented, subordinate groups, broadcast networks, prime-time television, prime time*

An item that was once considered a symbol of economic status in the 1950s, the television has since become a common appliance in the home and the most common source for immediate information (Signorrelli & Bacue, 1999). In 2009, Nielsen's Television Audience Report showed that most households have more TV's in the home than actual people (Nielsen's Television Audience Report, 2009). This is consistent with the idea that the family room is no longer the only place where watching television takes place.

Every year, television viewers tune in to see where the storyline of their favorite characters will take them. Some viewers are returning fans and some may be new to the viewing family. In addition to the television shows that have already established a strong following of fans on prime time, viewers are introduced to new sets of characters with new compelling storylines for them to follow. Most of these new shows appear during the fall season when other shows are making their exit (Signorrelli & Bacue, 1999). However it's not the names of characters or the houses they live in that keep people watching, it's the story. It's the viewer's ability to see their life or the story of their friends' lives played out on screen. It creates the connection that every television show needs to remain successful in a prime-time slot. The question is: does every viewer see their reflection on TV?

Many researchers have explored the relationship between the demographics of a television cast and the demographics of the television show viewers (Shachar & Emerson, 2000; Cohen & Weimann, 2000; Hammermeister, Brock, Winterstein, & Page, 2005; Hughes, 1980). Emerson's study found that viewers tend to watch shows that they can relate to whether it's through experience or race. This is closely related to the *cultivation theory*, which generally states that people who view TV for long periods of time are more likely to associate facts from television with reality. There are two processes that explain why accurate presentation on

television is important to society. The first process is *mainstreaming*, which refers to the converging of a person's perceptions of reality and perceptions of television. The second process is *resonance,* which states viewers are more likely to believe and become invested in a television show that relates to their own life. Researchers propose that since television is the most universal mass medium in the history of American culture, its power to affect the ways people think, formulate beliefs and behave is important when representing society (Gerbner, Morgan, Gross, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002).

The trend of relatable and representative characters has changed with every decade and with every decade a new group emerges. This is why researchers have constantly studied the changes in race, age and sexuality demographics on television in relation to the U.S. population (Elasmar, Hasegawa, & Brain, 1999; Signorrelli & Bacue, 1999; Lauzen & Dozier, 2004). While this study is similar to those conducted by other researchers, it includes topics where there is a lack of information.  It is important to the U.S. culture to discover which television networks have the best reflection of U.S. minorities and *subordinate groups* or underrepresented groups (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Since television is one of the most influential forms of mass media, it serves as a great starting point when exploring representation in mainstream media.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the *regular*, or opening credits, characters in prime-time programming for the major broadcast networks ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox and the CW at the end of the 2011-12 television season. This study specifically focused on the following research questions (a) how do the demographics of prime-time television programming compare to that of the U.S. population (b) how many *regular* prime-time characters are considered members of the *subordinate groups* (c) are these characters presented in a positive or negative

light using Clark's model and lastly and (d) on what genre and network are these *subordinate group* characters prevalent?

These questions will be addressed using information and background facts gathered from the literature review as well as the method of *content analysis*.

## Literature Review

*Prime-time Television*

Prime time is defined as the times during the evening when American viewership is at its highest. For Eastern and Pacific Time zones, prime time is considered 7:00-11:00 p.m. and 6:00-10:00 p.m. for Central and Mountain Time. Within those prime times, the 9:00 p.m. time slot for Eastern and Pacific Time zones have the highest viewership for the whole time span. For Central and Mountain Time, the prime time slot is 8:00 p.m. This also called HUT which stands for homes using television (Prime Time, 2012). According to the A.C. Nielson Company, 60 percent of televisions in American households are tuned into prime-time television programs every day (Sklar, 1980). During the 1960s it was common for only three major broadcast networks to attract 85 percent to 90 percent of the prime-time viewing audience. Now with the addition of several new cable networks and independent stations that percentage has decreased (Prime Time, 2012). Despite the decrease in control, broadcast networks still hold the largest platform to highlight characters from underrepresented groups for the television viewing audience.

*Representation*

When discussing the topic of the representation of certain groups of people in television there are commonly used categorization terms. Some of the most underrepresented people in television include Asian and Pacific Islanders (APAs), African Americans, Latinos and members

of the LGBT community. These groups are usually considered minorities. However the term "minority" doesn't accurately describe other less represented groups such women, children or the elderly. As a solution to this problem of classification, researchers used the term *subordinate groups* when analyzing characters in television. *Subordinate groups* are defined as identity categories differing from the socially dominant identity of a white, heterosexual, male adult (Mittell, 2010). Throughout the study, the groups being examined will be referred to as *subordinate groups* or underrepresented groups.

The groups chosen for this study were based on race and ethnicity, sexuality and weight. For this study, African Americans and Caucasians were excluded from the *subordinate groups* since they are actually considered over-represented in prime time, making up 74 percent of all characters compared to only making up 69 percent of the U.S. population (Hunt, 2002). The groups this study will focus on include Latinos, Asian and Pacific Islanders and Native Americans, people with disabilities, members of the LGBT community, and characters considered overweight. While the percentage of African American characters has remained relatively unchanged for the last ten years and the Caucasian characters are steadily increasing, the *subordinate groups* above are making little to progress of being seen in prime-time television programming (Hunt, 2002).

To simplify the understanding of this study and the researcher's coding process, the chosen *subordinate groups* are defined below:

- *Latino/Hispanic* – Spanish-speaking origin inhabitants of the United States (Zimmerman, et al., 1994);

- *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT)* – individuals who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (Gates, 2011) ;

- *Asian and Pacific Islander* – individual having Asian or Pacific Islander ancestry (Asian Nation);

- *People with disabilities* - "any restriction or lack (resulting from any impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" (Disabilities);

- *Native American* - American Indian and Alaska Native. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintain tribal affiliation or community attachment (United States Census Bureau); and

- *Individuals considered overweight* - ranges of weight that are greater than what is generally considered healthy for a given height; above a weight considered normal or desirable (Defining Overweight and Obesity).

*Trends*

Most of the chosen *subordinate groups* have seen a shift in representation in television. Studies by researchers such as Darnell Hunt (2002) and Signorrelli & Bacue (1999) have shown that these shifts have been both positive and negative. In a five-year longitudinal study conducted by Hunt (2002), some of the percentage gaps between prime-time television representation and the U.S. population were fairly large, while others were smaller. In the study of 85 situation comedies and dramas airing during October and November of 2002, Hunt found that Latinos only made up 3 percent of *regular* characters on prime time even though they make up 13 percent of the U.S. population. Despite the low percentage of representation, there is discussion that Latinos may emerge as the nation's largest minority group. Similarly to the Latino *subordinate group*, Asian and Pacific Islanders only made up 3 percent of prime-time

characters. However, the gap between the television representation and U.S. population of Asian and Pacific Islanders was only 1 percent. Even though the gap was smaller than most, none of the Asian and Pacific Islander characters were at the center of the program or storyline. Surprisingly, there were no Native American characters identified during this study. Six years later, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) reported that the numbers had improved. The report broke down the percentages of representation in film and television as the following: 6.4 percent Latino/Hispanic, 3.8 percent Asian and Pacific Islander and .03 percent Native American (Ruiz & Sustaita-Ruiz, 2009).

An example to support these increases is evident within the representation of the Asian and Pacific Islander group. In 2001, there were only 17 APA characters on prime time which dropped to 14 in 2002. In 2005, new shows such as *Heroes, Lost*, and *Grey's Anatomy* emerged introducing more diverse characters and opening the door for the arrival of more APA characters. By 2010, there were 37 APA characters serving as *regulars* in prime-time roles (Narasaki, 2011). As the numbers increased, so did the quality of roles for the APA characters.

The LGBT community saw similar progress in 2010. In September of that year, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) released its annual "Where We Are on TV" report indicating that characters with disabilities were "invisible" on scripted prime-time television. These studies come from analyzing characters on the major broadcast networks: ABC, NBC, CBS, the CW, Fox, and NBC. Less than 1 percent of the *regular* characters had disabilities, in comparison to the 12 percent population of disabled people in the United States. The lack of characters with disabilities could be in part to the audience's reaction to the storylines. An article published in "The Guardian" titled, "No Glee for Disabled People," argued that while non-disabled viewers showed favorable feelings toward disabled characters, people

who are disabled are put off by the storylines. They find the storylines "offensive, appropriative, and wildly inaccurate (People With Disabilities Greatly Under-represented on Television, 2011)."

Contrary to the less favorable reviews of disabled character storylines, LGBT characters are having a warmer reception despite the decrease the percentage of identified characters. In the same "Where Are We in TV (2011)" report released by GLAAD, it showed that LGBT prime-time characters had dropped from 3.9 percent in 2010 to 2.9 (Network Responsibility Index, 2012). Even though there was a dip in percentage, there is an increase in LGBT awareness. Some of the most popular television shows in prime time have LGBT characters in core roles including *Glee, Modern Family* and *Grey's Anatomy*. This positive representation in prime time is being translated into the changing opinions of society. Of the participants of the Pulse of Equality Survey, 19 percent reported that they've become more receptive toward the LGBT community over the past 5 years. Of those participants, 34 percent cited "seeing gay or lesbian characters on television" as a factor in their shift of feelings. This survey supports the importance of seeing characters who don't meet the "fit, heterosexual, white male" standard on a mass media format such as television.

As overweight characters slowly make their way back to prime-time television, audiences are unsure how to respond. In the past, audiences were more receptive to this type of character on television. Some of the most memorable overweight characters include Mimi Bobeck from *The Drew Carrey Show* played by Kathy Kinney and *Saturday Night Live's* Matt Foley played by Chris Farley, both characters introduced in the 90s. One of the more recent characters is Sookie St. James from *Gilmore Girls* played by Melissa McCarthy which aired during the early 2000s. Probably the most notable characters are Dan and Roseanne Conner played by Roseanne

Barr and John Goodman on the 80s hit sitcom, *Roseanne* (Oat, 2009). Although it's been done, critics say that it's not likely that television will see many more major prime-time roles being overweight characters (Respers France, 2010). While there is a small presence of overweight characters, it's only in sitcoms where their weight can be used at the expense of a laugh (Cohen A , 2011). Even though the discussed trends are general, it is important to remember that levels of *subordinate group* representation differ across all of the major broadcast networks being analyzed.

*Clark's Model*

When conducting an analysis of the positive treatment of minorities on television, Clark (1972) suggested that this would be measured in four stages: non-representation, ridicule, regulation and respect.  The stages are defined as: 1) *non-representation-* a given minority group is not acknowledged by the dominant media to even exist, 2) *ridicule* - certain minority characters are portrayed as stupid, silly, lazy, irrational, or simply laughable, 3) *regulation* - certain minority characters are presented as enforcers or administrators of the dominant group's norms, 4) *respect* - the minority group in question is portrayed no differently than any other group. This includes interracial couples (Fitzgerald, 2010). Each step is meant to be an improvement over the last. Clark originally created the model to examine the representation of African Americans in mass media. For this study, the model will focus on the multiple *subordinate groups* specified above.

To have a better understanding of each of the stages and their place in examining the characters on prime-time television, a more detailed description of Clark's stages and their implications will be given below (Fitzgerald, 2010; Clark, 1972):

Stage One: Non-representation. This stage of Clark's model usually refers to the extent that a *subordinate group* is ignored in a certain media format. The term *symbolic annihilation* was created by researchers Gerbner and Gross (1976) to determine a group's existence. They stated that "representation in the fictional world [of mass media] signifies social existence" with a group's absence signifying non-existence in the world.

Stage Two: Ridicule. In this stage, the *subordinate group* is humiliated or targeted with derogatory statements. This is considered an improvement of treatment compared to being non-existent. Characters belonging to the dominant groups use ridicule to dehumanize those who don't fit into the dominant identity. It also helps the character establish control or gain an "advantage" over the non-dominate characters.

Stage Three: Regulation. As stated above, in the regulation stage, subordinate characters have moved into the roles of regulators of the dominant groups norms. Regulator roles include police officers, soldiers, teachers and administrative officials.

Stage Four: Respect. In the last stage, the *subordinate group* is no longer treated or seen differently than the dominant group. This includes the acceptance of interracial or intergroup relationships as a part of the norm.

As a form of mass media, TV is considered a primary source of information. If these groups don't receive recognition and respect on TV and other forms of mass media, society is more likely to diminish and ignore these groups as well (Raley & Lucas, 2006).

The information gathered from the literature gives an in-depth look into the history of the chosen *subordinate groups* and the understanding of Clark's model purpose in the coding of these characters.

**Methodology**

The characters analyzed for this study occupy major roles on television shows airing during the 2011-12 prime-time season. For the purpose of this study, only scripted television shows on major networks CBS, NBC, ABC, CW and Fox were coded. This analysis included the process of dissecting and categorizing images, trends, genres and five major TV networks. Researchers who have done similar studies have used several different methods to explore the topic of representation in television. The *creator identity* approach was used by researchers to focus on the people behind the scenes (Giordano, Greverus, & Rohmhild, 2000, Lauzen & Dozier, 2004). Specific programs that have been studied with this approach include the 1980s police drama *Cagney and Lacey*, which was created by two female writers. Bill Cosby produced many programs including *The Cosby Show*, *Fat Albert* and *Cosby* that were specifically written to promote a positive image of African- Americans. The same could be said about Ellen DeGeneres and her sitcom *Ellen* introducing television audiences to her sexuality which she shared with her character. At some level, these shows and characters were shaped by the perspectives and identities of the people creating them (Mittell, 2010).

The *image analysis* approach has been used by scholarly researchers to study the portrayals of body image in advertising as well as the fat stigmatization in television (Myers & Biocca, 2006; Himes & Thompson, 2007). This method is more focused on the accuracy and nature of images portrayed on television compared to the reality of society (Mittell, 2010). Another approach is *textual analysis* which is used to identify the meanings of representation through production techniques, attributes and storytelling strategies (Fairclough, 2003, Mittell, 2010). Each of these methods have been used by researchers, but the best method to use when categorizing this study's areas of focus is *content analysis*.

*Content analysis* is a quantitative research method that involves exploring the images and representation of *subordinate groups* in a representative sampling of the mass-mediated popular art form of television (Berger, 1991). Academic researcher Krippendorff (2004), defines *content analysis* in relation to this study as: "…the analysis of the manifest and latent content of a body of communicated material (as a book or film) through classification, tabulation, and evaluation of its keys symbols and themes in orders to ascertain its meaning and probable effect." Similarly, professor and author Mittell (2004) defines *content analysis* as the setting of specific boundaries to measure within a selected group of programs and count the appearance of characters that fit into the identified categories. Mittell also suggests that *content analysis* is "best for answering questions where the coding groups are clear-cut and objective such as with appearance and visibility of certain identity characters."

To organize data collected using *content analysis*, a coding sheet was used (Appendix A). The coding sheet included a listing of the *subordinate groups* being studied, the major genres in prime-time television, the gender of the *regular*/main characters and the networks these characters are on. The previously defined *subordinate groups* chosen for this study include Latino/Hispanic, LGBT, Asian and Pacific Islander, people with disabilities, Native American and individuals considered overweight. These groups were chosen because of their lack of presence on prime-time television.

Caucasian and African Americans characters will be coded for the purpose of comparison but was not analyzed using Clark's model. The race of the character was determined by the surface or observable attributes and background of the actor as was the weight. For the categories of LGBT and disabled, characters where identified by observable attributes of the character on

screen. For additional understanding of the coding sheet components, the prominent genre

categories are defined below:

- *Police/crime drama-* higher level of violence than most shows, quick dialogue with

  likeable heroes who solve or investigate complex crimes (Crime Dramas) ,

- *Medical drama* – events center upon a hospital, an ambulance staff, or any medical

  environment (Barnet, 2007), and

- *Sitcom* (Sprangler, 2003)

  - Situational – the outline of events of the special funny 'thing' that is

    happening to the characters that week

  - Domestic – more emphasis on characters and setting (the home) than on a

    situation.

The above listed genres are considered prominent on network television. Other

subcategories were added to the coding sheet during the study, which can be seen in the results.

And lastly, the networks studied included:

- ABC,

- NBC,

- CBS,

- Fox, and

- CW.

Using the information gathered from the coding sheet, the researcher was able to better

present the studies' findings from the 2011-12 television season. Along with the categorized

data, Clark's model was used to give a more in-depth understanding of the roles and representation of these characters.

**Findings**

The sample gathered from the 2011 to 2012 prime-time television season consisted of 86 programs distributed among the five major networks including ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox and the CW. Within this sample of programs, a total of 640 *regular*, or opening credit characters were coded and analyzed. Of the 640 *regular* characters coded, 20 percent fit within the *subordinate groups* chosen for this study. As seen in Figure 1, programs aired on NBC and ABC accounted for 28 percent subordinate characters each, CBS accounted for 23 percent, Fox had 16 percent, and the CW only accounted for 5 percent subordinate characters.
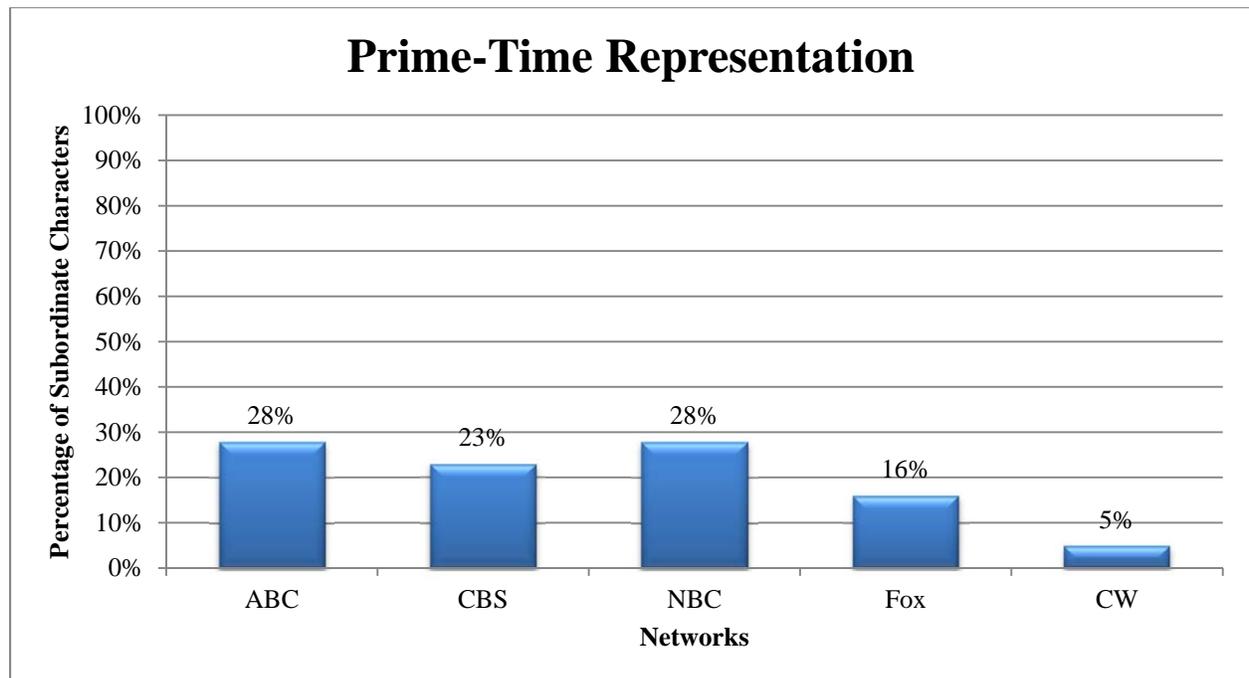


*Figure 1.* Total prime-time representation of coded *subordinate group* characters by network.

By each contributing to 28 percent of the subordinate characters respectively, ABC and NBC provide the highest percentage of underrepresented characters in this study, with CBS a fairly close second. The exact count of coded *subordinate group* characters is detailed in Table 1 by network.

Table 1

*Coded Subordinate Characters by Network*

|  |  | NA | L/H | O | APA | Lesbian | Gay | Bisexual | Trans | Disabilities | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ABC | Female | 0 | 8 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 15 |
|  | Male | 0 | 12 | 0 | 2 | N/A | 6 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 21 |
|  | Total | 0 | 20 | 0 | 6 | 1 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 36 |
| CBS | Female | 0 | 8 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 15 |
|  | Male | 0 | 5 | 4 | 4 | N/A | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 14 |
|  | Total | 0 | 13 | 9 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 29 |
| The CW | Female | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
|  | Male | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | N/A | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
|  | Total | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| Fox | Female | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 11 |
|  | Male | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | N/A | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 9 |
|  | Total | 0 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 4 | 20 |
| NBC | Female | 1 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12 |
|  | Male | 0 | 5 | 11 | 4 | N/A | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 24 |
|  | Total | 1 | 9 | 16 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 36 |
| Overall Totals |  | 1 | 48 | 27 | 21 | 2 | 10 | 11 | 0 | 7 | 127 |

*Note.* Table showing coded subordinate character breakdown by network. The 'N/A' indicates that males were not counted in this *subordinate group* because of defined *subordinate group*.

More evidence can be found in the analysis of each network, in addition to the comprehensive figures and tables included in this study.

**Network Analysis**

*ABC*

As mentioned above, ABC tied for the highest percentage of *subordinate group* characters. Of the 127 coded *subordinate group* characters, 28 percent were found in ABC's prime-time programming. Within this 28 percent, or 180 *regular* characters coded for ABC, 14 percent of the 88 female characters and 15 percent of the 92 male characters fit into the underrepresented ethnicities chosen for this study. Figures 2 and 3 show that more than 70 percent of the male and female characters coded on ABC belonged to the Caucasian ethnicity.
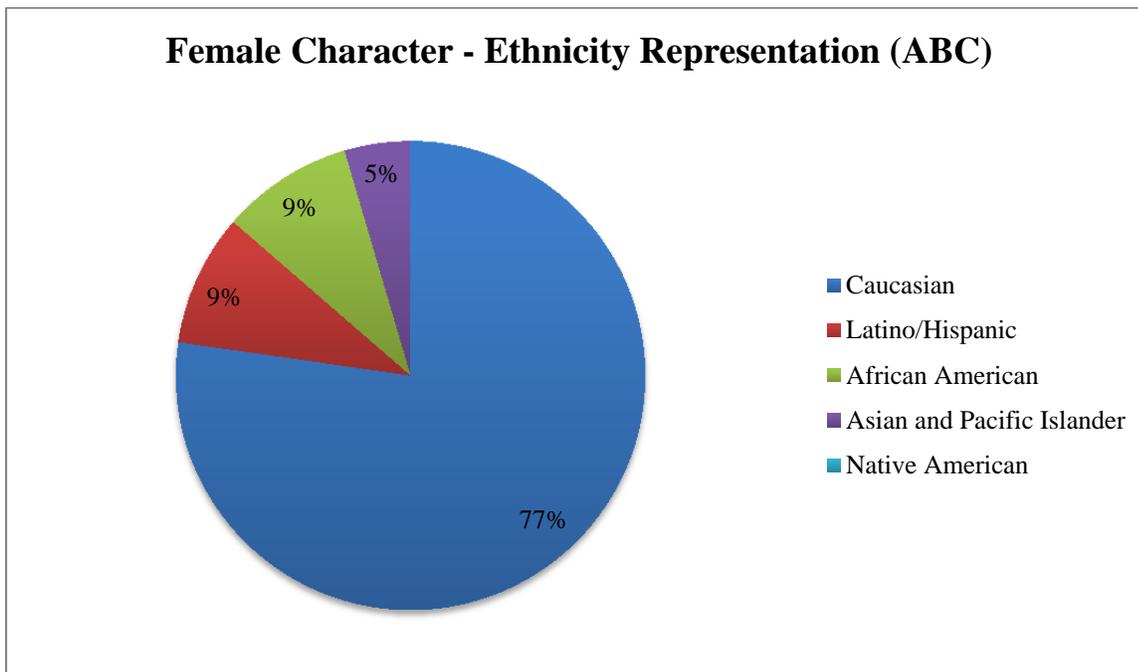


**Female Character - Ethnicity Representation (ABC)**

5%
9%
9%
77%

■ Caucasian
■ Latino/Hispanic
■ African American
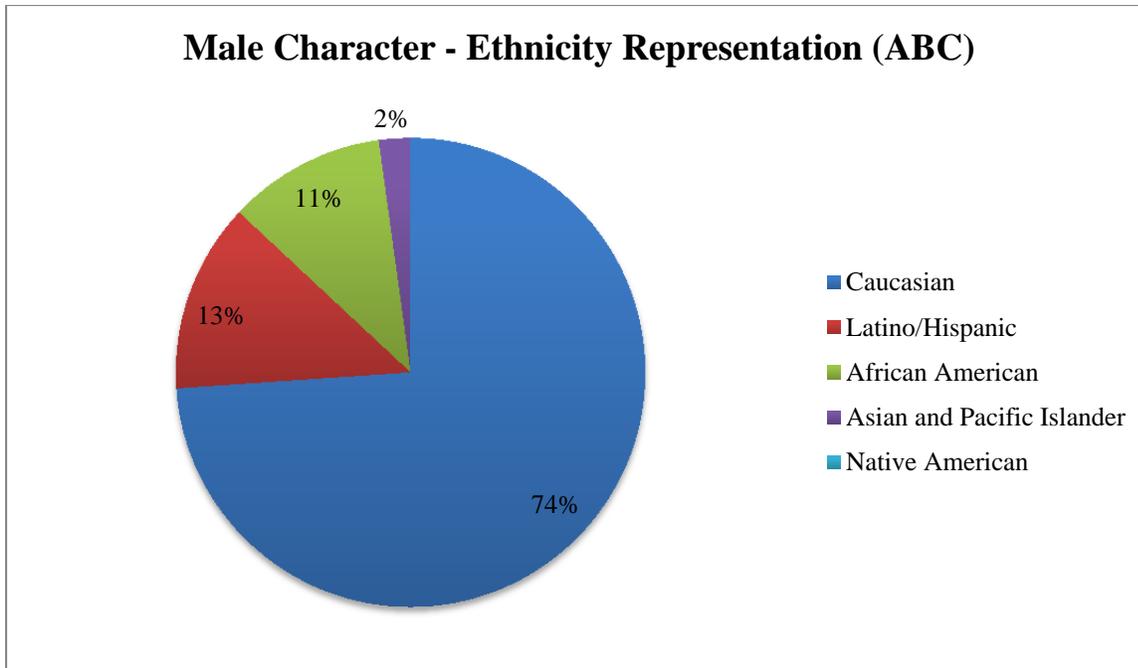■ Asian and Pacific Islander
■ Native American

*Figure 2.* Pie chart showing the percentages of ABC female character representation for each ethnicity included in the *subordinate groups* chosen for this study.

**Male Character - Ethnicity Representation (ABC)**



- Caucasian
- Latino/Hispanic
- African American
- Asian and Pacific Islander
- Native American

2%
11%
13%
74%

*Figure 3.* Pie chart showing the percentages of ABC male character representation for each ethnicity included in the *subordinate groups* chosen for this study.

ABC characters accounted for 42 percent of Latino/Hispanic characters on prime-time television among the five major networks, which is more than two times the number of Latino/Hispanic characters on NBC. ABC also had the highest number of characters belonging to the Asian and Pacific Islander category. Outside of ethnicity, ABC also had high representation in other coded categories. Figure 4 shows that ABC had 10 characters representing the LGBT community, the highest representation (43 percent) from the LGBT community out of the five networks.
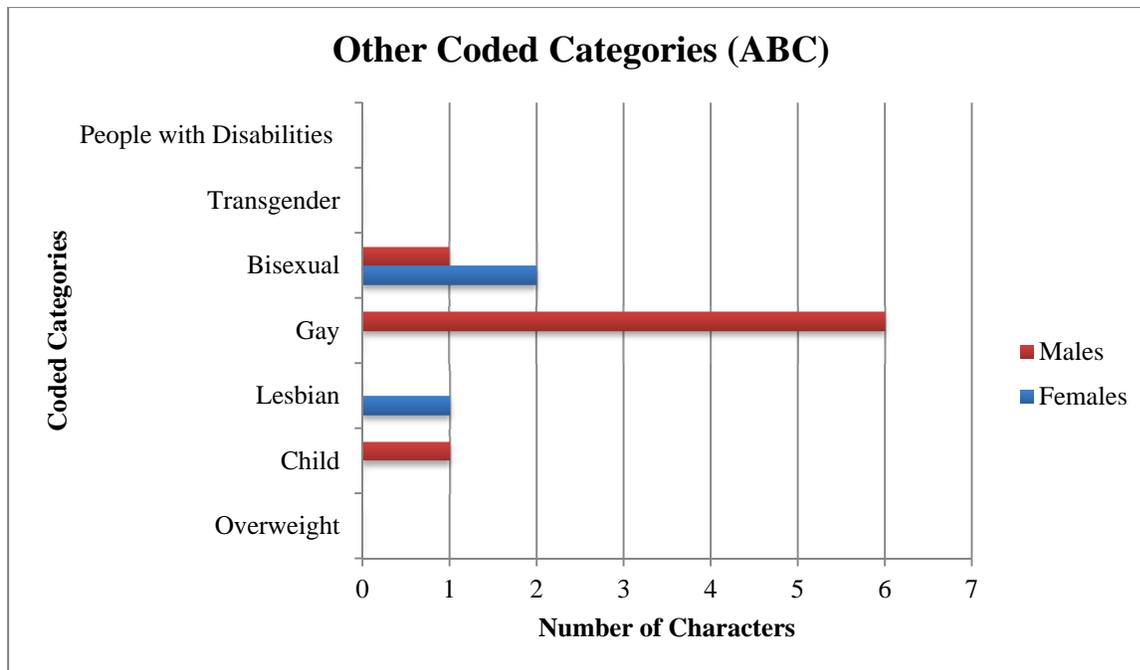
## Other Coded Categories (ABC)



*Figure 4.* Bar graph showing the number of characters on ABC that belonged to other coded *subordinate groups* outside of ethnicity. The characters are separated by sex.

Despite being tied with NBC for the highest number of lesbian characters, with one each, *Grey's Anatomy* introduced the first *regular* prime-time lesbian character in 2009. The character, Arizona Robbins, made her first appearance during the series' fifth season and has remained a *regular* character ever since. Shonda Rhimes, the creator of *Grey's Anatomy,* one of the top five watched shows of the 2011-12 season (see Table 2), and two other ABC prime-time hits *Private Practice* and *Scandal*, is responsible for casting 22 percent of ABC's subordinate characters through her programs. In addition to *Grey's Anatomy*, ABC is also the home network to the number one watched show of the 2011-12 television season (see Table 2), *Modern Family*.

Table 2

*Top Ten Watched Prime-Time Programs (2011-12)*

1. Modern Family (ABC)
2. The Big Bang Theory (CBS)
3. Two and a Half Men (CBS)
4. 2 Broke Girls (CBS)
5. Grey's Anatomy (ABC)

6. New Girl (Fox)
7. How I Met Your Mother (CBS)
8. Once Upon a Time (ABC)
9. NCIS (CBS)
10. Mike & Molly (CBS)

*Note.* From "Full 2011-2012 TV Season Series Rankings," by N. Andreeva, 2012, May 24. Retrieved from http://www.deadline.com/2012/05/full-2011-2012-tv-season-series-rankings/.

*Modern Family* is another prime-time program known for its diverse group of *regular* characters. While ABC's highest representation percentage was within the LGBT *subordinate group*, its counterpart, NBC showed higher percentages in other *subordinate groups*.

*NBC*

Out of the five major networks analyzed, NBC had the highest number of characters from the overweight *subordinate group*. Referring to Figure 5, NBC had more than half (59 percent) of the overweight characters represented on the five networks – five female characters and 11 male.
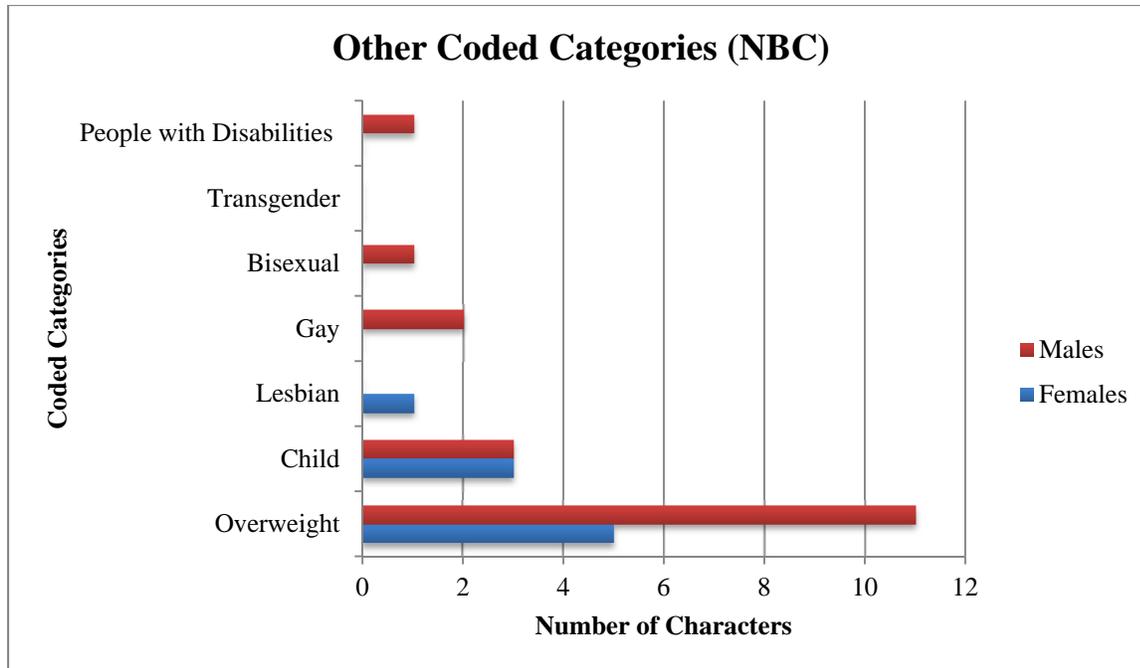
*Figure 5.* Bar graph showing the number of characters on NBC that belonged to other coded *subordinate groups* outside of ethnicity. The characters are separated by sex.

As a network, NBC had a total of 154 *regular* characters with 41 percent female and 59 percent male. Figures 6 and 7 show the overall ethnicity representation for both the female and males characters. Both the female and male casted characters contributed 10 percent to the Native American, Latino/Hispanic and Asian and Pacific Islander categories on NBC.

**Female Character - Ethnicity Representation (NBC)**

Legend:
- Caucasian
- African American
- Latino/Hispanic
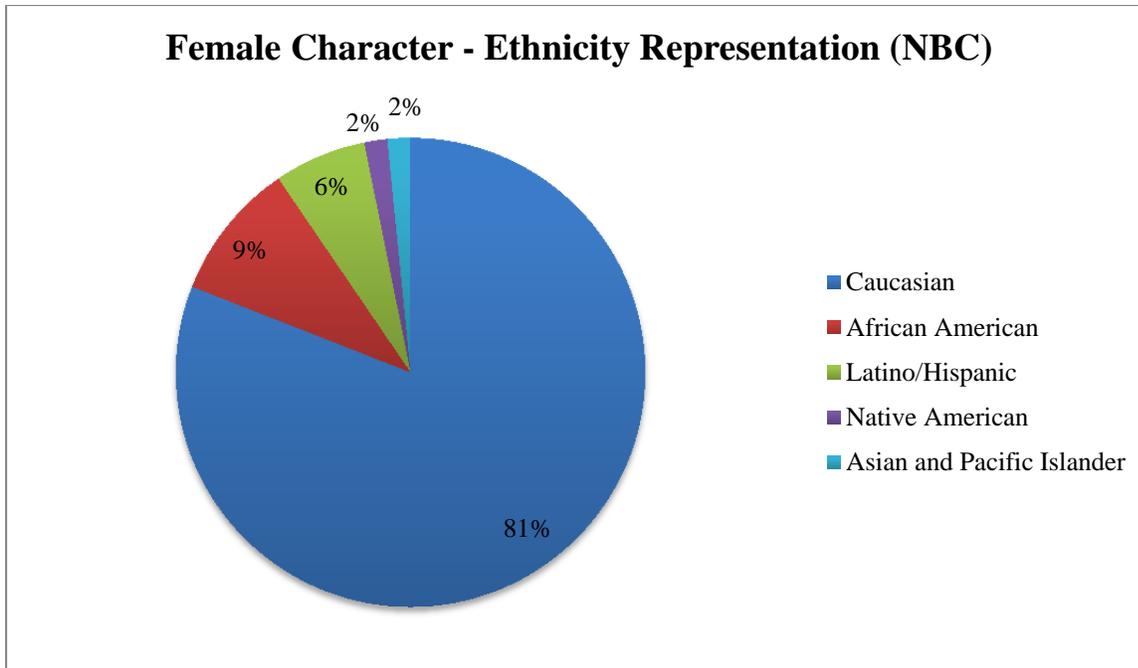- Native American
- Asian and Pacific Islander

*Figure 6.* Pie chart showing the percentages of NBC female character representation for each ethnicity included in the *subordinate groups* chosen for this study.



**Male Character - Ethnicity Representation (NBC)**

Legend:
- Caucasian
- African American
- Latino/Hispanic
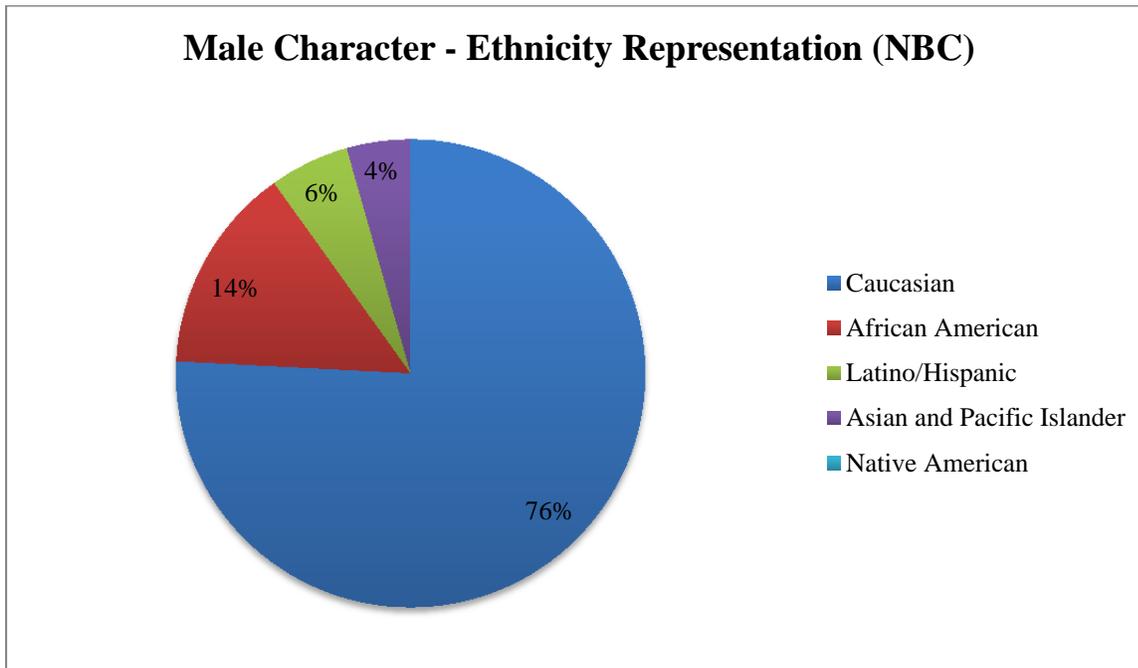- Asian and Pacific Islander
- Native American

*Figure 7.* Pie chart showing the percentages of NBC male character representation for each ethnicity included in the *subordinate groups* chosen for this study.

In fact, NBC had the only Native American character, Carol-Lynne from *The Playboy Club*, coded on the major networks for the 2011-12 television season. Regardless of having sole representation of a lead Native American character in network prime time, NBC had low representation in other coded ethnicities where CBS excelled.

*CBS*

With 148 *regular* characters, 20 percent of those characters were coded to fit into the *subordinate groups* chosen for this study. Figures 8 and 9 show that 15 percent of CBS's female characters and 10 percent of male characters contributed to the network's underrepresented ethnicities.
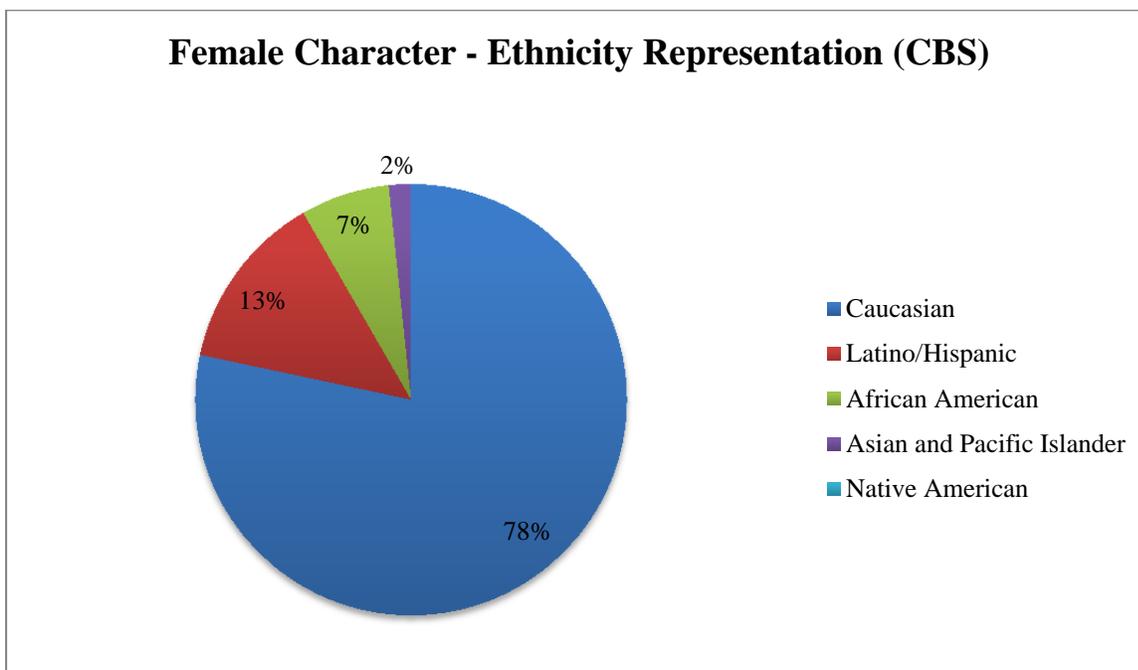


**Female Character - Ethnicity Representation (CBS)**

- Caucasian
- Latino/Hispanic
- African American
- Asian and Pacific Islander
- Native American

*Figure 8.* Pie chart showing the percentages of CBS female character representation for each ethnicity included in the *subordinate groups* chosen for this study.
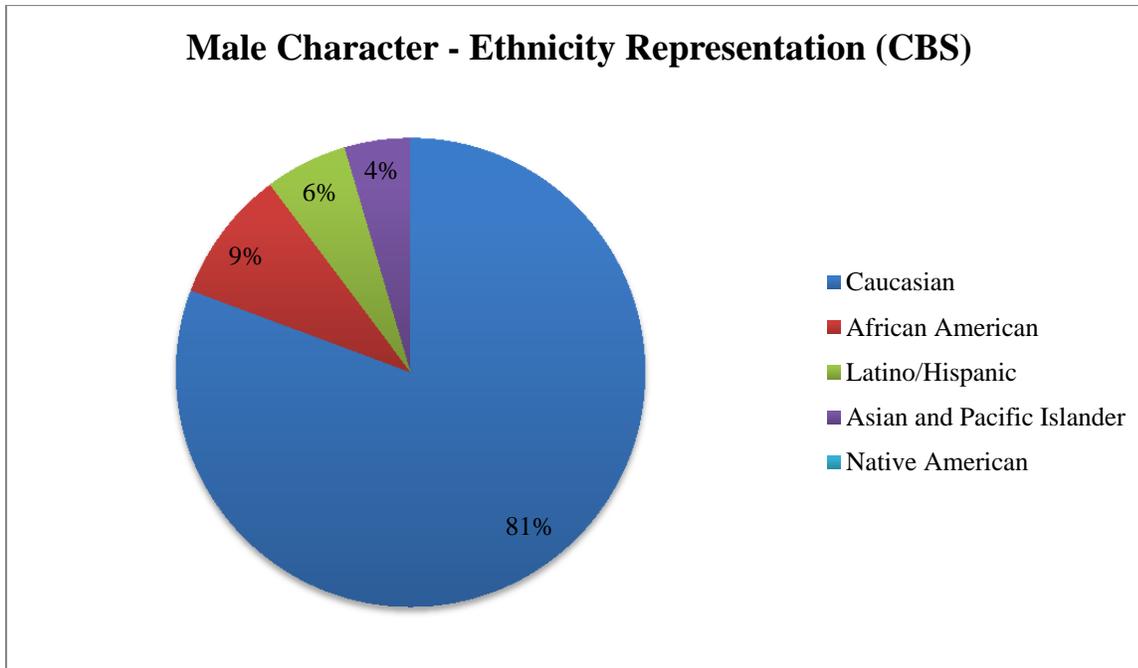
*Figure 9.* Pie chart showing the percentages of CBS male character representation for each ethnicity included in the *subordinate groups* chosen for this study.

According to Figure 10, CBS had the second highest representation in the overweight

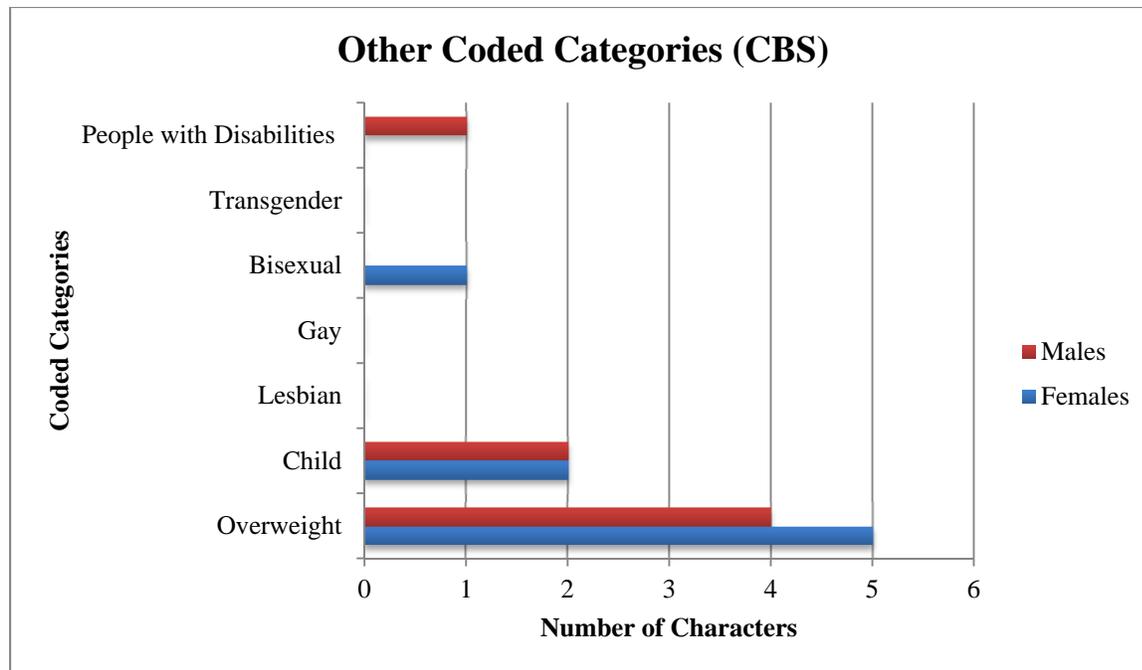community with nine characters fitting into that category.

*Figure 10.* Bar graph showing the number of characters on CBS that belonged to other coded *subordinate groups* outside of ethnicity. The characters are separated by sex.

This representation is most in part to the CBS hit *Mike & Molly*, which has two overweight lead characters. CBS is also the only network to credit an animal, dog, as a lead or *regular* character. As the number one watched network on television, CBS ranked second with 23 percent of characters represented from the *subordinate groups*. This percentage of representation was 5 percent lower than the leaders of ABC and NBC but 5 percent higher than the Fox network.

*Fox*

Fox's *regular* characters only made up 16 percent of the total amount of subordinate characters coded, as can be seen in Figure 1. It can also be seen in Figures 11 and 12 that only 26 percent of Fox's *regular* characters belonged to the Latino/Hispanic and Asian and Pacific Islander groups.

*Figure 11*. Pie chart showing the percentages of Fox female character representation for each ethnicity included in the *subordinate groups* chosen for this study.
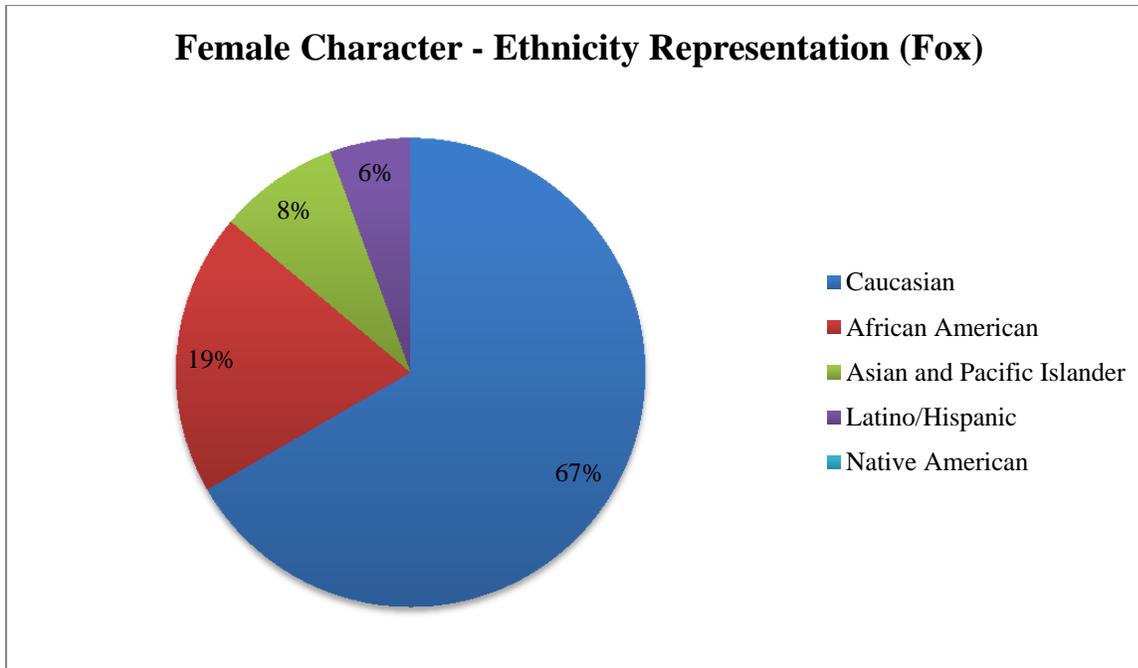


*Figure 12*. Pie chart showing the percentages of Fox male character representation for each ethnicity included in the *subordinate groups* chosen for this study.
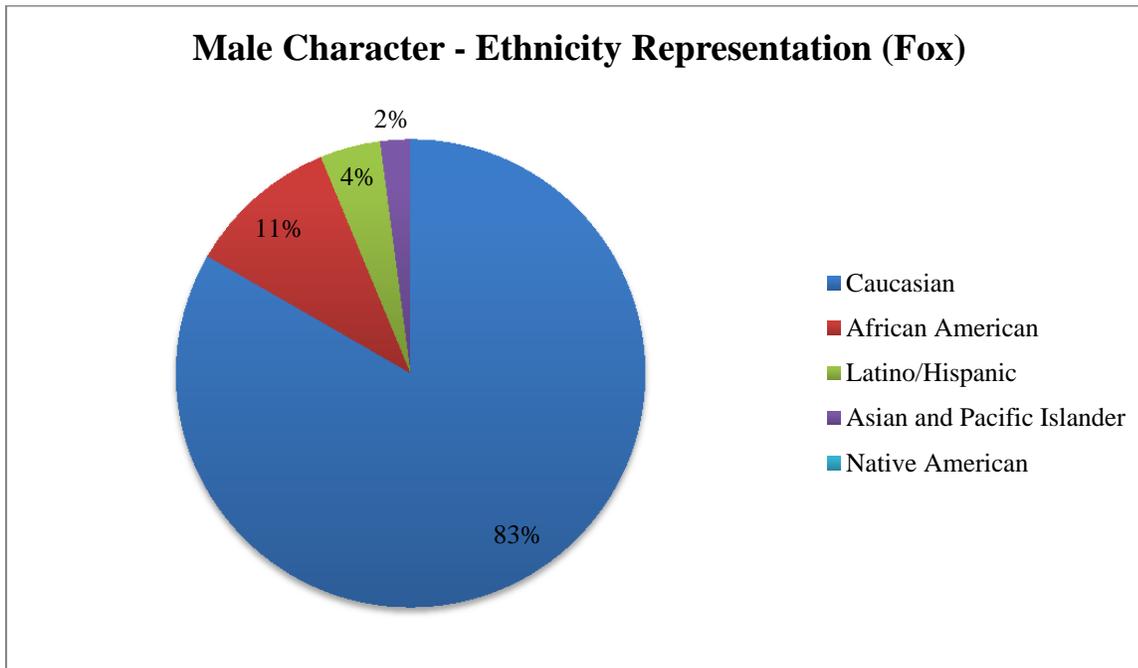
However, Fox shows a high representation in other coded categories including the LGBT community and people with disabilities, according to Figure 13.
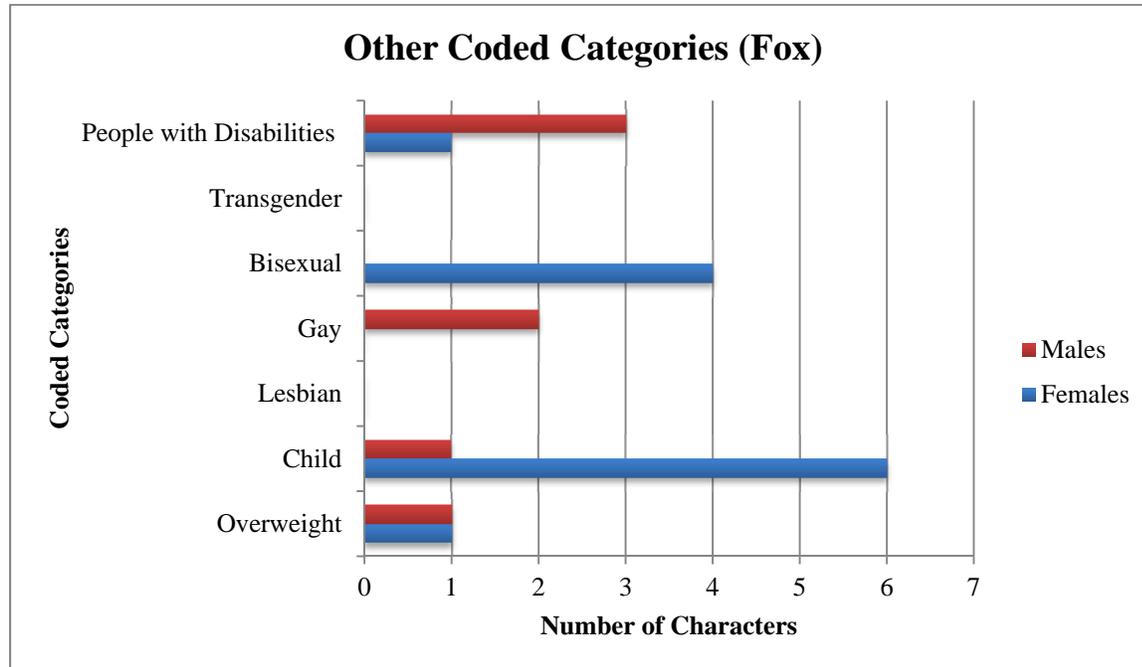


*Figure 13.* Bar graph showing the number of characters on Fox that belonged to other coded *subordinate groups* outside of ethnicity. The characters are separated by sex.

Some of the most notable characters in these *subordinate groups* are found on Fox shows *Glee* and *House*. *Glee*'s character, Artie Abrams and *House*'s Dr. Gregory House, are two of most well-known characters with disabilities in prime-time network television. Both characters are played by actors without physical disabilities. In addition to people with disabilities, *Glee* makes up 42 percent of all *subordinate group* characters on Fox. Although Fox contributed a fairly low percentage to the total representation, the network's numbers are still three times the representation on the CW.

*The CW*

Of the five networks analyzed for this study, CW showed the lowest representation from

the *subordinate groups* with only 5 percent, as seen in Figure 1. With a total of 74 *regular*

characters examined in this study, only six characters belonged to the *subordinate groups* coded.

Table 1 shows that the coded *subordinate group* characters included one character in the

Latino/Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Islander and people with disabilities groups and two

characters whom identify as bisexual (see Figure 14).
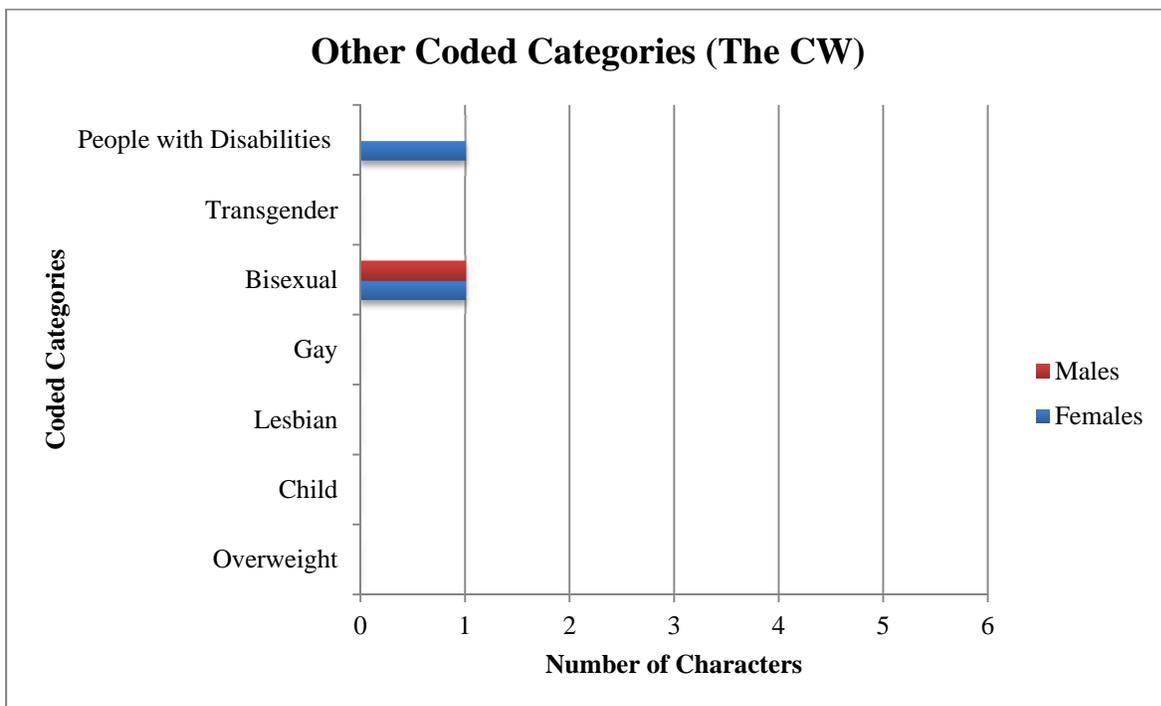


*Figure 14.* Bar graph showing the number of characters on the CW that belonged to other coded *subordinate groups* outside of ethnicity. The characters are separated by sex.

As shown in Figures 15 and 16, 93 percent of the female characters and 84 percent of

male characters fit into the Caucasian group.
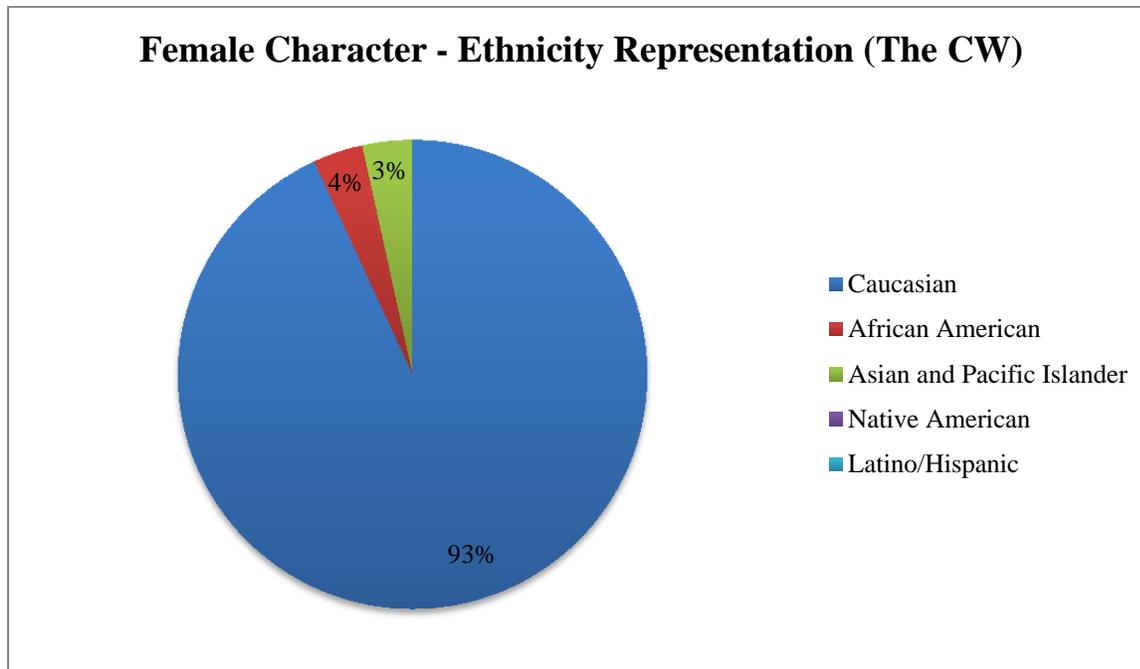


*Figure 15.* Pie chart showing the percentages of the CW female character representation for each ethnicity included in the *subordinate groups* chosen for this study.

**Male Character - Ethnicity Representation (The CW)**

5%

11%

84%

■ Caucasian
■ African American
■ Latino/Hispanic
■ Native American
■ Asian and Pacific Islander

*Figure 16.* Pie chart showing the percentages of the CW male character representation for each ethnicity included in the *subordinate groups* chosen for this study.

After conducting a general analysis of each network, the television programs and characters were categorized by genre to answer Research Question 3.

**Genres**

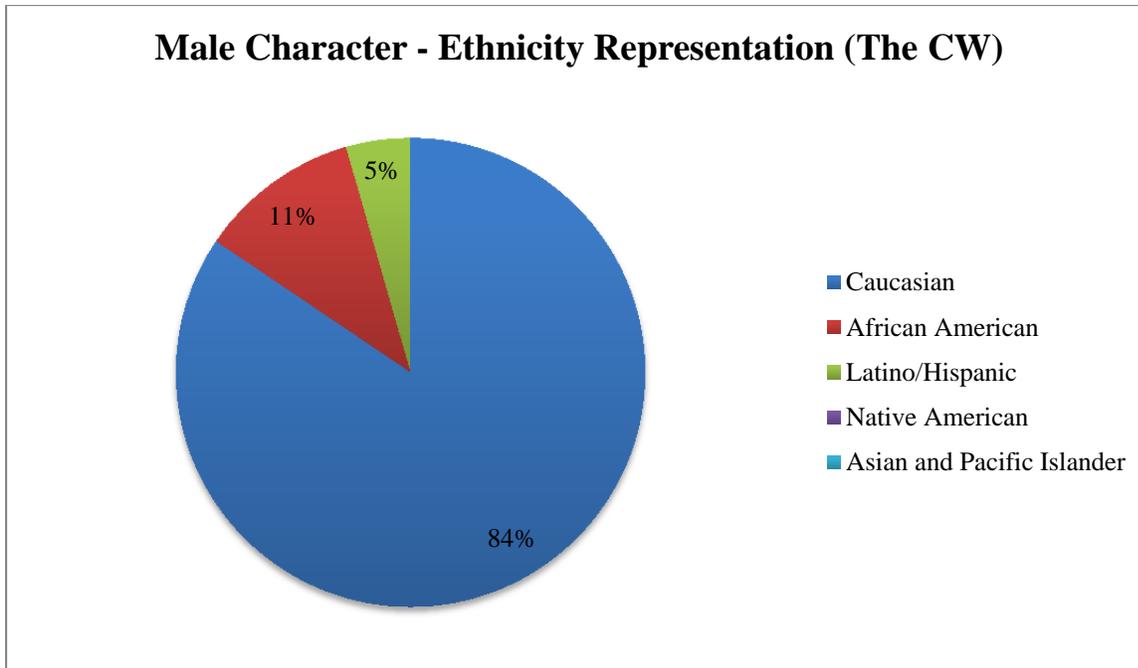Each of the 86 prime-time television programs coded was divided into four main genres, with one of the genres having seven subgenres. This was done to see a breakdown of the most popular genres and to see where the coded *subordinate group* characters fell. Of the 86 programs – three were thrillers, eight were supernatural, 32 were situational comedies and the largest genre was drama, with a total of 43 programs. Those 43 drama programs were further categorized into the following subgenres: Police – 12, Legal – 3, Medical – 7, General drama – 8, Dramedy (comedy and drama) – 4, Crime – 6, and Teen – 3. The results seen in Table 3 answer Research Question 4 regarding the level of representation by highlighting which genre had the most subordinate characters.

Table 3

*Subordinate Character Genre Breakdown*

| *Genre* | NA | LH | O | APA | Lesbian | Gay | Bisexual | Trans | Disabilities | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Thriller* | 0 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 |
| *Supernatural* | 0 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| *Sitcom* | 0 | 15 | 19 | 7 | 0 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 50 |
| *Drama* | 1 | 18 | 6 | 10 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 0 | 3 | 48 |
| *Dramedy* | 0 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 16 |

*Note.* Table showing subordinate character representation broken down by genre.

The results indicate that a majority (70 percent) of the overweight characters were found on sitcoms, as predicted by critics. Characters who coded as Latino/Hispanic were present on both comedies (15) and dramas (18) specifically playing cops on police dramas. The only Native American character was on a crime drama as a Playboy Bunny Mother. The seven characters with disabilities were present in all genres except thriller. One of the characters coded with disabilities includes Jacob Bohm from Fox's supernatural drama *Touch*. Bohm is a mute 11-year-old who can see past, present and future events through his only way of communication, numbers. He uses these numbers to warn his father of negative things to come. In this instance, the character with the disability is playing the role of a hero. Table 3 also indicates that most of the coded gay characters were on comedies as well while a majority of Asian and Pacific Islander characters were on dramas. The only two lesbian characters were on drama television programs, one a Playboy Bunny on *The Playboy Club* and the other a pediatric surgeon on *Grey's Anatomy*. After noting the *subordinate group* representation in each television genre, the

overall representation percentages for each *subordinate group* were compared to the U.S.

population.

## Population

In looking for the most relevant population statistics for the 2011-12 prime-time

representation, the 2010 U.S. Census data was used for comparison. This helped in answering

Research Question 2 about the comparisons in prime-time character demographics and the U.S.

population. When the data from this study was compared to the percentage totals of previous

studies and the 2010 U.S. Census report, it was clear that there were some improvements in

representation, but there were still some groups that remained underrepresented (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Representation Percentage Comparison Chart*

| Subordinate group | 2010 U.S. Census (%) | Previous Studies (%) | Author's Data (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Asian and Pacific Islander | 5 | 3 | 3.3 |
| Latino/Hispanic | 16 | 3 | 7.5 |
| Native Americans | .9 | 0 | .2 |
| People with Disabilities | 19 | .3 | 1.1 |
| LGBT | 3.8 | 2.9 | 3.6 |
| Overweight | 26 | N/A | 4.2 |
| Total (%) | 70.7 | 9.2 | 19.9 |

*Note.* Table comparing *subordinate group* representation between the 2010 U.S. Census, previous data and the author's data. The U.S. Census data retrieved from *http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/miscellaneous/cb12-134.html.*

For the Asian and Pacific Islanders group, there was an increase of 0.3 percent from previous studies and only a 1.7 percent difference from the actual U.S. population. The Latino/Hispanic group showed an increase from previous studies, but trailed the U.S. population by 8.5 percent. While the results of this study showed only a 0.2 percent representation of Native Americans, this is an improvement from the previous percentage of 0. The gap between prime-time representation and U.S. population doesn't seem as drastic considering Native Americans made up 0.9 percent of the population in 2010. For people with disabilities, the numbers are slowly improving with a 0.8 percent increase, which is still disappointing considering this group represents 19 percent of the population. Overweight characters have probably seen the greatest increase. This *subordinate group* of characters went from near 0 representation to 4.2 percent representation in prime-time network television. The final *subordinate group*, the LGBT community, experienced a slight increase in representation. As seen in Table 4, previous studies indicated that the LGBT community accounted for 2.9 percent of prime-time characters, which has since increased to 3.7 percent. This *subordinate group* had the closest prime-time representation and population percentages. While there is still room for growth in the number of characters from *subordinate groups*, the numbers are still increasing even if it's at a slower pace. In addition to comparing the findings to the U.S. Census, the chosen *subordinate groups* were further analyzed using the stages of Clark's model.

**Clark's Model**

For this study, Clark's model was only applied to the *regular* characters of three prime-time programs analyzed. The programs - *Modern Family* (ABC), *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC) and *Mike & Molly* (CBS) – were chosen for two reasons: 1) they were among the top ten watched

prime-time network programs at the end of the 2011-12 television season (see Table 2) and 2) the lead characters fit into the *subordinate groups* specified in this study.

Through implementing Clark's model, it was discovered that several characters demonstrated characteristics from more than one stage. However, due to the focus of this study, only the dominant stages of the subordinate characters will be discussed. While the range of stages for one of the programs varied, the other two programs had similar stages across all characters.

For *Grey's Anatomy*, all of the *subordinate group* characters were at the respect stage in Clark's model. This meant the characters were portrayed no differently than the other groups on the program including in the positive and negative roles of everyday life. The characters, Cristina Yang, a Korean medical resident; Arizona Robbins, a lesbian pediatric surgeon and her wife Callie Torres, a bisexual orthopedic surgeon, made up the *subordinate group* representation on *Grey' Anatomy*. The interactions between these characters and the other lead characters showed no signs of non-representation or ridicule. In most cases, these characters were praised above the other dominant group characters on the program. This shows that these characters are accepted as an equal part of the television show and the society that exists at the hospital, Seattle Grace Mercy West. Whereas *Grey's Anatomy's* subordinate characters were all in roles of respect, the characters of *Mike & Molly* were on the opposite end of Clark's representation model.

Most of the *subordinate group* characters on CBS's sitcom, *Mike & Molly*, were at the ridicule stage and have remained there since the beginning of the series. Upon further research, the sitcom is rooted in overweight jokes beginning with the main characters, Mike and Molly Biggs, meeting at an Overeaters Anonymous club. Even though a majority of the characters on

this program fit into the overweight *subordinate group*, Mike and Molly were portrayed as the focus of this ridicule. Not only do Mike and Molly make fun of their own weight on a regular basis, the other characters do as well. This includes Molly's mom, Joyce Flynn, who makes it a habit to mock Mike about his weight and eating habits. There is also the character of Samuel, a waiter at the local restaurant who insults Mike anytime he sees him and addresses him as 'Large Man.' Despite Samuel's constant negative comments, he is still considered a friend. As a result of their similarities in overweight lead characters, ABC's 80s sitcom, *Roseanne* and *Mike & Molly* are often compared. Although Roseanne shared the common thread of *subordinate group* lead characters, the comedy was rarely directed toward their weight as seen on *Mike & Molly*. After examining this sitcom with Clark's model of representation, the behaviors and comments that might be humiliating and considered ridicule for some, are portrayed on *Mike & Molly* as acceptable forms of communication. Unlike *Mike & Molly* and *Grey's Anatomy*, ABC's *Modern Family* characters' fit within different stages of Clark's model.

For the most part, the *subordinate group* characters on *Modern Family* are at the respect stage. Even though it is identified in almost every episode, the gay couple, Cameron Tucker and Mitchell Pritchett, is not treated any differently than the other characters. The only times their sexuality is brought up as a focal point is when it is used as a plot device for another character. In this stage as well is Manny Delgado, the son of Gloria Pritchett and stepson of Jay Pritchett. Although he is a member of the Latino/Hispanic *subordinate group*, he still remains in the respect stage. On the other hand, his mother, Gloria Pritchett falls into the ridicule stage. This character, described as a 'fiery Latina,' has characteristics that are often over exaggerated to gain a laugh. For instance, her short temper and raised voice when having a conversation, the many cultural traditions she speaks of that often involve murder and violence, and the focus on her

constant mispronunciations of words. Even other characters tease her about how she is difficult to understand because of her heavy accent. While this may not be an accurate representation of the Latino/Hispanic culture, Gloria's character has been created to be "simply laughable." These short applications of Clark's model answer Research Question 3 about whether these subordinate characters are shown in a positive or negative light.

Since only a small sample of television programs was analyzed using Clark's model, there aren't any conclusively results as to whether all *subordinate groups* are being portrayed in more positive or negative manner. However, since the sample contained three of the top watched shows of the 2011-12 television season, it is safe to say that some of these highly viewed programs are enforcing the ridicule of the same *subordinate groups* that have little to no representation on television. This information joined with the other results of this study have provided enough information to determine the direction of *subordinate group* characters and what that means to the television viewing audience's perception of them.

**Discussion**

With these findings, the researcher was able to effectively answer all four research questions posed at the beginning of this study. While some of the conclusions were straightforward, it was found that Research Question 1 actually had two answers. This makes it difficult to say which network is showing the greatest representation of the *subordinate group* characters coded for this study because of the equal percentages of representation on both the ABC and NBC networks. Even though the questions were answered, there are a few limiting elements that could have made this study more comprehensive.

One of the smaller limitations is that the recurring and guest characters on these prime-time television programs were not coded for. By not coding these characters, the researcher could have potentially eliminated other characters belonging to the *subordinate groups*. For example, several transgender characters made appearances on police and crime dramas. This limitation also cuts out love interests for several *regular* lesbian and gay characters. The coding of these characters would not have made a significant difference, but it would have given a closer estimation to the exact number of characters represented.

Another limitation is the number of prime-time programs on each of the networks analyzed. The number of programs on each network differed depending on how long each program ran. For example, ABC could have been airing more 30-minute programs than NBC, which means more programs that fit into the prime-time slot. This could have possibly given ABC more opportunities for *subordinate group* representation than NBC. While the researcher has no control over the length of shows on these networks, equality among the programs and characters could have provided this study with a more balanced dataset for each network. Consequently, as more programs are aired, more characters will appear on the network. Once again, this relates back to the number of opportunities for *subordinate group* character representation. In relation to opportunities of representation, a larger sample size would have provided a broader scope of results for the research. As continued research, the researcher can possibly widen their sample pool to the top 30 watched television shows in network prime time.

The last limitation is the departure of *regular* characters or the departure of complete programs. This problem affects the number of characters coded in each of the *subordinate groups*. For example, at the end of the 2011-12 season, NBC's *The Playboy Club* was cancelled taking the only coded Native American character with it. Twenty-eight other programs met the

same fate as *The Playboy Club*, while another eight programs had natural endings. Depending on how many subordinate characters were on each of these programs, it affects the researcher's final numbers. While the results of this study are accurate for the 2011-12 season, continuing research will be necessary to mark the changes in the newest 2012-13 television season.

As previously mentioned, all three of these limitations are out of the control of the researcher. However, there are ways for this study to continuously progress. For the purpose of this study, only prime-time programs on major networks were analyzed because of their high viewership. However, one way to further the study is to include prime-time characters in cable programming. This will give a more accurate level of representations across all television programs that air during prime time. In addition to this, researching the demographics of the viewers of these shows would be interesting, especially to understand if there is a relationship between who is seen on screen and the viewers watching at home. Even further research would include looking into the *creator identity* method, as mentioned within the methodology section, for the television program that have high numbers of *subordinate group* characters.

Regardless of these limitations, the results of this study were effective in giving the researcher an idea of where *subordinate group* representation stood at the end of the 2011-12 season. The breakdown of information illustrated which networks were more accurately representing the U.S. population.

As the most watched networks on television, ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox and the CW have one of the biggest platforms in media. While there has been an evident change in the level of representation in prime time on these major networks, there is still opportunity for improvement.

Judging by the results of this study, ABC and NBC seem to be leading television in the direction toward a more equal representation of all *subordinate groups*.

**Appendix A**

## Coding Sheet

Network:

Time Slot:

Television Series Title:

Genre:

Number of *Regular* Characters:

| Character | *Subordinate group* | Gender | Level on Clark Model |
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |
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*Legend*

*Subordinate group*

- LH – Latino/Hispanic
- LGBT – LGBT
- APA – Asian and Pacific Islanders
- D – Disabled
- O – Overweight

Gender

- F – Female
- M – Male

Clark's Model

- 1 – Stage One: Non-recognition
- 2 – Stage Two: Ridicule
- 3 – Stage Three: Regulation
- 4 – Stage Four: Respect

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