

ABSTRACT

REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH IN *MENACE II SOCIETY*

by Rachel N. Bonaparte

Media and society have always shared a mutual fascination in regard to gang life, especially through the use of “hood” films like *Menace II Society*. Stereotypical images of African American youth continue to exist and are extremely prevalent within this film. Over the years, African American youth seem to be depicted less and less in versatile roles, if depicted at all in Hollywood films, and is an issue that requires further examination. Through the use of frame analyses with social comparison theory as the theoretical base, this research examines messages regarding drugs/crime, family, and education and possible interpretations based on this film. Furthermore, this research discusses the possible impact these messages may have on youths’ self-perceptions. Results indicate that crime/violence tends to be seen as a form of power, drugs as a form of wealth, the black family as resilient and non-traditional in its family structure, and education as insignificant.

REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH IN MENACE II SOCIETY

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Introduction

“We went into the store just to get a beer [but] came out an excessive and murderer in armed robbery. It’s funny like that in the hood sometimes; you never knew what was going to happen or when. After that, I knew it was going to be a long summer” (Hughes, 1993).

The opening quote in *Menace II Society* is the banal premise of many African American “hood” films in which violence is expected. Fisher (2006) defines “hood” films as “any film that emphasize[s] life on the street. The context is specific to urban environments. These films are overwhelmingly male-oriented, often telling the story of gang members and low-level drug dealers” (p. 9). “Hood” films are infamous because “of the controversy surrounding the impact of some of the films on their audience when they opened in theaters across the country, a controversy with both ‘real-world’ and theoretical significance for questions about the role of the reader, text, and immediate social context in shaping meaning” (Fischer, 2006, p. 9).

Menace II Society deals with a young boy named Caine who grew up in the “hood,” which according to “hood” films involves drugs, money, alcohol, and guns. Caine is torn between accepting life as he knows it and giving in to *change*, which could help improve his life. The idea of change in the beginning did not seem like an option to Caine because his parents died when he was very young (because of crime and drugs) and the one friend he was closest to, Pernell, was sent to jail. He felt obligated to help take care of Pernell’s family and try to keep an image among his peers as a tough guy who isn’t afraid and can take care of himself. Oftentimes, Caine found himself contemplating doing what was right, comfortable, or socially acceptable. Peer pressure and pride seemed to be two of the main themes of this film. For those who grow up in the hood, there is constant competition among peers to avoid being seen as weak or incapable. Though they know the end would be death or jail, they grow accustomed to running from or hiding from the cops, selling drugs, or doing whatever they believed was necessary to survive. The people who lived in the hood seemed to think they were invincible. One teen, O’Dog, portrayed as not caring about anything, was the lone survivor among his friends in the end. He was the most reckless one of them all.

Among characters acting out their own antisocial behaviors, O’Dog nevertheless stood apart for shooting people on the spot with no hesitation. His attitude toward life in general

suggested he did not care about too much. Some may argue that he did care to a certain extent, because when his best friend died he was in total shock and started to cry. It's as if events do not seem authentic to this age group until they affect them directly. One could argue that the title *Menace II Society* specifically referred to O'Dog. He seemed to be the biggest menace because he was so careless and reckless. In fact, an unfortunate message for young audiences may be the more careless individuals are, the more likely they are to escape death or other repercussions. In this film, corruption starts at a young age and only escalates until the characters make a conscious decision to go against the crowd and stand on their own.

Through the use of frame analysis, this study will evaluate the portrayal of messages specifically regarding Drugs/Crime, Family, and Education within *Menace II Society* that may be formulated in a way that could negatively affect African American youth's self-perceptions. *Menace II Society* is an accredited "hood" film by Albert Hughes, released May 28, 1993 to 581 theaters with a total gross of \$27,912,072. The film received a grade of B with an opening-weekend ranking of number seven making it one of the top films watched (according to Box Office reviews) and beating out other popular films like *Unforgiven* (1992) by Clint Eastwood and *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (1993) by Rob Cohen. Today, this film and other similar "hood" films, such as *Get Rich or Die Trying* (2005) and *Hustle and Flow* (2005) are still shown frequently on channels such as Black Entertainment Television (BET) or United Paramount Network (UPN), which is now part of CW network. According to Crupi and Consoli (2006, as cited by Matsaganis, Katz, and Ball-Rokeach, 2010), before UPN became CW, most of its sitcoms/shows and advertising dollars were spent targeting African American and Hispanic viewers; the same can be said about BET.

Problem and Purpose

According to the pre-imminent sociologist of the 20th century, "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity" (Mead, 1934, p. 135). The self continues to develop as a result of perceptions and interactions with others and the media (Mead, 1934; Slater, 2007). Understanding the development of self will provide insight into how individuals, especially

youth, gain a sense of identity and an overall self-perception. African American youth are portrayed in cinema as adolescents in search of a sense of identity and acceptance. They will go to any length, including going to jail, in an attempt to maintain a reputation as one who is fearless, for instance, according to portrayals in “hood” films like *Menace II Society*. Unfortunately, these depictions correspond to black youth’s actions in reality as indicated in frequent news reports. Poverty, drug use, and underachievement are examples of the banal themes ascribed to the African American community as portrayed in cinema. This author conjectures that these themes are often perpetuated throughout films without any cognizance of future impact on the cognitive development of African American youth and their self-perceptions.

The purpose of this research, again, is to look at the messages portrayed in “hood” films, specifically, *Menace II Society*, to examine potential affects they may have on African American youths’ self-perceptions, as well as to explore methods for improving this situation. There have been quite a few studies on the impact of media on people in general and youth specifically but this study will look at the specific messages in this particular film and potential impact they may have on Black youth’s perceptions of themselves.

For the purpose of this analysis, the term “self-perception” will be used to incorporate the concepts of self-identity and self-esteem. Self-identity deals with how an people see themselves, internal identity, physical identity, personal goals, values, what makes them unique, or how they see themselves in relation to others (Perara, 2007). Improving or understanding one’s personal identity will not only impact the way he/she thinks about himself/herself and how he/she reacts to challenging situations, but also help improve an individual’s self-esteem and confidence (Perara, 2007). Conversely, self-esteem is one’s general opinion of himself/herself, which therefore impacts the individual’s potential to be successful in life, and affects how he/she thinks’ or interacts with others (Perara, 2007). Because the relationship between self-identity and self-esteem are similar and frequently used interchangeably in some research such as Rumbaut’s (1994) article regarding the assimilation of immigrant children, this particular analysis will substitute the term self-perception, which incorporates self-esteem and self-identity.

One hopes that by promoting an equal opportunity for Black youth (in which they see positive and balanced images of themselves and are affirmed on the benefits of life's experiences) equivalent to those of other prominent groups, more Black youths will become effective participants in society. Research is limited in regard to the impact of films on African American youth self-perception. However, limited research indicates that exposure to movie violence is associated to stronger pro-violence attitudes (Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, and Baumgardner, 2004). Candito (1996, as cited in Reasoner, 2005) states "that low self-esteem is the underlying origin of all problematic behaviors, and the true disease that plagues the world, resulting in alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and all other obsessive behavior including criminal behavior" (p. 1). Messages in "hood" films regarding drugs/crime, family, and education are the three main areas that this research will explore through the use of Framing Analysis, as these are areas that are commonly depicted within "hood" films.

Significance of this research

Today, African Americans face a variety of stereotypes (whether they are positive or negative), lack of role models, conflicting situations (e.g., drugs, alcohol, jail), depression and suicide, lack of higher education (or education in general), diseases and specifically STD's (primarily associated with this culture), and many other issues that would contribute to one's self-perception. These issues are portrayed in "hood" films at one point or another (Fisher, 2006). The question thus becomes whether the films are a reflection of reality or depict and influence reality. Finding strategies to encourage positive self-perception may help counteract the social issues plaguing the African American community, and one of the most efficient methods of doing this may be through the evaluation of popular media.

According to 2005 Nielsen Media Research, "African-Americans are heavy television users. African-American TV usage exceeded total U.S. and all other for all hours of the day Monday-Friday and Saturday-Sunday." Late night usage (9 p.m.-11 p.m.) and early morning usage (2 a.m.-6 a.m.) are the highest TV viewing periods for African Americans. They more than double the total U.S. use for both weekdays and weekends (Nielsen Media, 2005). It is clear that African Americans do, in fact, watch substantial amount of TV, including films. For example,

some “hood” films, as mentioned before, are shown on BET and UPN/CW. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate how these movies portray familiar (and maybe stereotypical) characteristics of African Americans, and influence their self-perception. “Hood” films are the primary focus because they tend to portray many of the familiar characteristics or stereotypes associated with the African American community (as often suggested by society), one of which would be African Americans’ frequently going to jail or coming out of jail or prisons.

Of particular interest would be the difference in self-perceptions between males and females. Statistics concerning TV (which may include watching “hood” films on certain channels) indicate, “African-American women average a higher viewing percentage than adults, men, and children on both weekdays and weekends” (Nielsen Media, 2005, p. 1). So, one would expect that if there were an impact at all, TV messages would have more of an impact on women than on men. Of interest also would be the difference in self-perception between youth and adults. Viewing data show, “African-American non-adults view similar amounts of TV during primetime and late night for both weekdays and weekends. During the hours of 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., African-American non-adults view at least 10% more television on the weekends” (Nielsen Media, 2005, p. 1). African Americans therefore are familiar with the popular media and are, in fact, engaging in it as well. Thus it is important to examine what themes are being emphasized by the media, specifically, “hood” films.

According to William L. Van De-Burg (as cited in Fisher, 2006), “the media’s fascination with gang life played a significant role in normalizing the image of young gang members wreaking havoc on society” (p. xv). John Singleton (as cited in Fisher, 2006), the director and writer of the 1991 “hood” film *Boyz n the Hood*, stated, “they [the media] don’t want to deal with the fact that the high crime and murder rates are directly related to the illiteracy problem, the homeless problem, problems in American educational system... Everybody else copies young black men. If I reach them, everything else will fall into place” (p. 59). Celeste A. Fischer’s (2006) book, *Black on Black*, describes a perfect example of others trying to imitate black men. She explains that rap music has “been instrumental in attracting nonblack audiences to ‘hood’ films because the films were, for the most part, an extension of the rap video... young white listeners of black music are trying to ‘perfect a model of correct white hipness, coolness, and

style by adopting the latest black style and image” (Fisher, 2006, p. xiv). These audiences also apparently have accepted another stereotype associated with African Americans that all Blacks listen to rap music and are associated with coolness/hipness. In effect, Black youth are empowered in the sense that they have become potential role models or the epitome of “coolness” to others. In other words, the media’s glorification/fascination with violence, rap music, and gang life may have damaging effects on Black youth’s self-perception (by glorifying negative or questionable actions); this is especially with media’s perpetuation of certain images and stereotypes.

Stereotypes

People rely upon stereotypes, whether positive or negative, to understand others and sometimes as a way to compare people to a “standard”. This comparison can be made within the same social groups, cultures, or in contrast to media/film characters. So when people or situations do not seem to fit into this “standard” it tends to create dissonance because we do not understand or have control of that particular situation. It should come as no surprise that stereotypes would be used in this case to understand African Americans. Professor Steven Gray (2005) from Yale University argues, “The practice of racial stereotyping through the use of media has been used throughout contemporary history by various factions in American society to attain various goals. The practice is used most by the dominant culture in this society as a way of suppressing its minority population... In contemporary American society the most effective way in which stereotypes are perpetuated is through the [media] of film and television. Images from these [media continually] bombard American children with negative and unrealistic portrayals of African American life or deny the existence of African Americans in a ‘true’ American society at all” (p. 1).

Common Stereotypical Images

As Professor Gray insinuated, there is historical background to present day images of African Americans. According to Reddick (1944), there are said to be about 19 principal

stereotypes of the Negro in the American mind, including *the mental inferior*, *the natural-born musician*, *the irresponsible citizen*, among others. Renowned film historian Donald Bogle took the initiative of narrowing down the five most prominent stereotypical Hollywood images, which include the Coon, Uncle Tom, Mammy, Tragic Mulatto, and the Black Buck. Depictions of the Coon are seen as the lazy and inefficient jive-talking Black character who avoids work at all cost. The Uncle Tom character is the Black man who serves his white master faithfully. The Mammy is the female version of Uncle Tom; she is normally an overweight Black woman who takes care of the master's children. The Tragic Mulatto is a woman of mixed-race who normally dies at the end of a film as punishment for her "sin" of being mixed race. "Hood" films tend to reproduce the stereotype of the Black Buck. The Black Buck is depicted as the animalistic, brutal, and hypermasculine African American man. He is known to be a sexual predator at times. Because of his alleged sexual prowess, it is conjectured that he threatens the white establishment and is a reflection of the white man's fear about Black male power. Black men may seek revenge/retribution through brutality and raping "their" white women (as was done to their Black women for centuries).

Bogle (1989) claims that fears surrounding the Tragic Mulatto and Black Buck have to do with fear of miscegenation and the psycho-sexual dimension to social prejudice. The Coon, Uncle Tom, and Mammy are figures that support the supposed beneficence of slavery, and are frequently seen as childlike, asexual, and happily docile (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). Eugene Wong (1978) notes the representation of non-white cultures and characters are still today static and one-dimensional. For this reason, stereotyped images of African Americans tend to be dichotomized between good and evil.

These "hood" films are also known as "Ghettocentric Hood Films." Ghettocentric Hood Films paint a portrait of the marginalized individuals who makeup underclass African American communities and often tend to be portrayed as one-dimensional, anti-authority, materialistic, violent, and dismissive about the value of education. Unfortunately, these films are primarily the products of Black male filmmakers (Fisher, 2006). The representation of an educated, Black, middle class is almost nonexistent in this genre (Fischer, 2006, p. xii). Fischer states:

[This] genre was generated out of Black masculinity--young Black men coming of age in hostile environment where knowledge of the streets is essential to their survival. The characters live in impoverished neighborhoods where drugs and gang activity are a way of life. Many come from single-parent homes where the father is rarely visible. In the "New Ghetto Aesthetic," Jacquie Jones notes that women in this genre generally occupy supporting roles, ranging from strong yet flawed single mothers to crack addicts. More often than not, they are referred to as "bitches" and "hos" (Fischer, 2006, p. xi).

The fact that when Black women are portrayed in these films they are normally crack addicts, prostitutes, or other characters of that sort speaks volumes about how women are viewed as well as their role in society. One could argue that positive depictions of females are nearly nonexistent.

The extent to which these representations are mirrored elsewhere in the media and in real life will be explored. Commonly, people make assumptions and conclude that certain stereotypes or incidents are true within a community based on statistics (rather than viewing them as simply stereotypes). Oftentimes, these impressions/statistics serve only to reinforce established viewpoints. Some of the main African American stereotypes include situations regarding black males in prisons, lack of "legitimate" jobs, and lack of education.

Theoretical Connection

Children and adolescents can be the targets of peer pressure and cruelty. Wanting to be accepted or seen in a particular light is definitely common, specifically among youth (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997). Peer pressure among adolescents is also portrayed in many "hood" films. In an attempt to avoid potentially being an outcast, adolescents may look to their peers, media (film), or other people as ways to assess themselves. Among the theories to address

this phenomenon is Gerbner's (1969, as cited in Gordon, 1998) *Cultivation Theory*, which "emphasizes the importance of regular media exposure, arguing that people who consume more media will gradually come to adopt beliefs and attitudes similar to the messages conveyed in the media" (p. 1). It was previously noted that there is evidence that African American youth do, in fact, watch a substantial amount of television (which may include movies on certain channels); therefore, they are particularly vulnerable to media influence of this sort. Alternatively, Charles Horton Cooley's (1902) *The Looking Glass Self* maintains that we derive our sense of self from the way that others view us: for example, how peers view other peers. So if an adolescent, for instance, is influenced by actions or style of dress that they consider "cool" from a film, they may assess/judge their peers accordingly. In other words, not conforming to the popular style (as seen in film), may negatively impact the youth's sense of self due to belittlement by their peers. Festinger's theory of *Social Comparison* combines Cooley's focus on others' perceptions and Gerbner's emphasis on effects of repeated media exposure.

Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory, as previously mentioned, was proposed by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954 and later confirmed by the pioneering work of Schachter (1959) on anxiety and affiliation. This theory explains how comparisons with peers or members in our social group are later internalized in an attempt to form an assessment about ourselves. In other words, there is this need to compare oneself to outside images or other people in an attempt to evaluate one's own abilities and opinions. One of the most universal social behaviors is to compare oneself to others (Brewer & Hewston, 2004). Festinger's theory is very similar to Charles Horton Cooley's theory of the *Looking Glass Self* by comparison; Horton's theory explains that an individual sees himself or herself according to how others see him or her. To reiterate, unlike Horton's theory, Festinger claims that the individual "compares" himself or herself to others, which is different from an individual assessing himself/herself solely according to how others view him or her. This is very important because it can be presumed that in many situations, in order for a person to take on the perceptions of another, he or she would have to initially notice a difference and compare himself/herself to the other person to see where he or she stands. Festinger's theory goes on to explain that we compare ourselves to people somewhat

similar to us, so it is, in fact, not done at random: “Because of the adaptive value of adequately sizing up one’s competitors, the need to compare self with others is phylogenetically very old, biologically very powerful, and recognizable in many species. Scholars have long recognized the importance of social comparison for human adaption and survival” (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001, p. 467). Recent scholarship suggests that this type of constant comparison still exists. This is especially so when adolescents emulate what they see in films and take what they have learned to their peer social groups; peers within that particular group then compare each other to that standard. The question becomes, to what extent does this sort of comparison become unhealthy or detrimental?

Social comparison theory may be useful in studying the development of self-perception of African American youth as well as the decisions they tend to make based on these perceptions. This theory may also give a better insight into peer pressure and its influence in decision making. Social comparison theory has led to further work into *upward social comparison*, pioneered by Wheeler (1966), and the *downward social comparison*, which was expanded upon in the now-classic paper by Wills (1981).

Upward Social Comparison

The upward social comparison concerns the setting of goals that are attainable. As applied to “hood” films, a typical scene would involve a young man in school who has always been a good student, has stayed out of trouble, and has received good grades despite his living environment (e.g., growing up in the hood/ghetto with a single mother -- two well-known stereotypes). His neighborhood friend, who happens to almost be twice his age, is a high school dropout who is selling drugs and makes a lot of money, drives fancy cars, has nice clothes, and seems to be doing well for himself. The student looks up to this neighborhood friend because not only does he seem to be making it, but he also receives the utmost respect from the rest of the neighborhood. So he aspires to be like the neighborhood friend because school doesn’t seem as important or relevant, especially when he does not have any money, learning doesn’t seem valuable, and he thinks he is going unnoticed. Although it may be obvious to some that the

neighborhood friend is not the best person to emulate, the student's aspirations are limited by his environment.

This aspiration starts an inevitable downward spiral. The student's desire to become like the neighborhood friend is either based on the need for inclusion or acceptance, or it is based on a personal need to see what it feels like to succeed. Berger and Calabrese (1975) state that people like the young male in the example become anxious when they are unable to make sense out of their environment. Moreover, Festinger (1954) has suggested that "persons seek out similar others who are proximate when they experience a high level of uncertainty regarding the appropriateness of their behavior and/or opinions in a particular situation" (p. 210). So in this case, if education is not appealing, if everyone is dropping out (and fulfilling the stereotype perpetuated through media), it is not valued in that environment, or there are simply no examples of success within that environment, one would then contemplate what is of actual value or importance to him or her. For the student, respect, inclusion, and money may be of more value and importance at that time, especially if that is what his/her environment is promoting.

One could argue that if the student had more of a sense of who he/she was (or self-perception) and wasn't having this sort of identity crisis, he/she may have been able to see clearly the other side of the matter. For example, he/she would've been able to see the fact that this neighborhood friend was engaging in illegal activities, from which nothing good can come. On the other hand, if there were better role models or authority figures, he/she would have someone else to compare to and therefore see other positive options. This may have the effect of retarding the student's development of what Mead (1934) conceptualized as The Self. As the author has noted (above), Mead (1943) argues that the self is constantly growing and perhaps at that particular age the student is still in the beginning stages of life and therefore still figuring out his/her self-identity.

Downward Social Comparison

The other part of social comparison theory is the *downward social comparison*. This comparison allows people to feel better about themselves, but ultimately creates a division

whereby people feel they are better than others. Wills argues that “in situations that produce a decrease in well-being, individuals will often compare with others who are thought to be worse off in an effort to improve their well-being, particularly when instrumental action is not possible” (Bunk & Mussweiler, 2001, p. 468). This method is often used as a means of self-enhancement. For example, if we use the first scenario again and imagine that the student decided to take the perspective that despite the fact he/she doesn’t have money and may not be part of an “in-crowd” at school or in the community, at least he/she is staying out of trouble, he/she is not constantly running from the police, he/she is not hooked on drugs, and he/she is making a path that will enable him/her to later be successful despite his/her environment.

Whether people compare in an effort to be like someone else or to feel they are better than another, they are initially comparing for the sake of trying to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Reducing uncertainty is an attempt to see how similar to or different from another person they are, especially within their social groups. There may be many different reasons why they would be interested in that information. Commonly, it is purely because of personal gain or interest. We like to see where we stand in comparison to others, in a general sense. After evaluating where we stand in comparison to others, depending on whether or not we like our position will determine whether there is a need to set goals to be like someone else or not. With this, self-perception is implicated because if an individual is comfortable with himself/herself and not aspiring to be like someone else for what may later seem like pointless reasons, then he or she may tend to make better decisions. The issue becomes: who is to say whether or not peoples’ reasons for making certain decisions are legitimate or not? In the 1970s, social comparison theory underwent a vital rebirth focusing on the potential negative consequences of upward social comparison and the positives of the downward social comparison: “These new perspectives considered basic comparison motives other than self-evaluation, namely self-enhancement and self-improvement, and included a variety of ways engaging in social comparison...” (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001, p. 469). Thus, an additional concern for this research would be youth’s motives for their comparisons.

The author believes that social comparison theory is the best fit to analyze African American youths’ development of self-perception through the influence of “hood” films,

specifically in regard to their interactions and comparisons with others in their social groups. As they assess themselves in reference to their peers, what sort of impact does it have on their self-perceptions? In order for any of this process to take effect, it is presumed that the person has to relate to the movie or to a character in the movie as well as have some sort of assessment of himself/herself in general. In other words, the individual should have at least a slight understanding about himself/herself (or self-identity) in order to even start comparing to different characters. Social comparison theory assumes “self-evaluations are assimilated to a given standard under conditions in which judges focus on similarities between themselves and the standard. In situations in which judges focus on differences, on the other hand, contrast is more likely to occur” (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001, p. 470). But the notion of a “standard” may be problematic, since research suggests that there are *individual differences* in the extent to which people compare themselves to others and in the way that comparison information is interpreted. Of particular interest would be the way that comparison information is interpreted within the social group and then cultivated throughout that particular community, to the extent that the community gets exploited by media/film through perpetuation of stereotypes.

Frame Analysis Approach

This analysis will focus on the messages regarding Drugs/Crime, Family, and Education as portrayed in *Menace II Society*. Although the messages may be seen as simply stereotypes, research suggests that there may be some truth to them and that these messages may, in fact, interact with youth self-perception. It is this author’s assumption that this creates a give and take cycle because as one gains a concrete perception of self and engages in the social comparison process within his or her group, generalizations and stereotypes emanate to the media, which are recycled back to the community, re-impacting self-perception. Evaluation of the messages regarding Drugs/Crime, Family, and Education will be accomplished through the lens of framing analysis.

Frame Analysis is composed of three parts: the production process, examination of texts, and the “interaction of texts with an active audience engaged in negotiating meaning” (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001, p. ix-xi). Framing can define the terms of a debate without cognizance

from the audience that it is taking place. “It offers an alternative to the old ‘objectivity and bias’ paradigm, it helps us to understand mass communication effects, and it offers valuable suggestions for communication practitioners” (Reese et al., 2001, p. 96-97). Primary emphasis is on the organization of structures and how they get established. Entman (1993a, as cited in Reese et al., 2001) “suggested that frames can be located in the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture... frames are principles of organizing information...[that] naturally lead to [it] being excluded or included, such that one may not even notice the exclusion” (p. 14).

Assumedly, it would be very common for film audiences to be ignorant of information that may be excluded or included, whether purposely or not, and whether positive or negative. Especially with films, it is conjectured that many viewers tend to watch blindly or haphazardly just for entertainment purposes, so it would be easy for negative depictions or certain frames to slip by.

The production process is the stage that looks at the struggle over meaning and the ways that certain frames are produced and later reproduced. This process gives a voice to the silent aspects/discourses, especially regarding sponsors who may be excluded and rather brings attention to the less visible hegemonic powers that marginalize their preferred frames (Reese et al., 2001). This component deals more with the empirical aspect.

The second stage, examination of texts, at times can create issues because “even within an agreed level of analysis (e.g., frames about abortion policy), two independent investigators will inevitably slice up the discourse in different ways” (Reese et al., 2001, p. x). Different frames may illuminate different aspects of texts for different individuals, which is oftentimes contingent on their social background. The array of frames for a particular topic are viewed as complementary because they are each useful for answering different questions (Reese et al., 2001). This particular component will be used in thoroughly analyzing the three specific messages (Drugs/Crime, Family, and Education) depicted in *Menace II Society*, and on the potential influences they may have on Black youths perception of self. It will allow for an in-depth analysis and understanding of the evident and subliminal messages portrayed within the film.

The third stage of frame analysis deals more with media effects. Although closely related to the previous two components, emphasis is placed on the influence of content/text on passive

audiences. There are debates about whether or not framing effects should be reduced to a secondary form of agenda-setting. Power issues raised in examining production as well as the issues about text meaning tend to be deflected within this debate (Reese et al., 2001).

Upcoming Chapters

Through the use of second stage frame analysis, this study will evaluate the messages regarding Drugs/Crime, Family, and Education as portrayed in *Menace II Society*. The following chapter will provide a basic historical overview of African American film and how “hood” films came about as well as their impact on their audience and potential influences on self-perception. Discussions in the next chapter will be on issues concerning drugs/crime messages depicted in this film. This study will analyze messages that Black youth may pick up on and try to emulate or take back to their social groups. The following chapter will be on family and the value of education and how improvement of self-perception may help Black students aim higher. The final chapter will attempt to tie everything together.

This author hopes recognizing these racial stereotypes, messages, and the potential harmful effects of perpetuating them will change people’s approaches in interactions with others and their attitudes that may have been ingrained.

Chapter 2: Brief History of African Americans in American Film

The study of Hollywood film industry, representational practices, and spectatorial cultures are all influenced by race and ethnicity; and in film the study of race and ethnicity is shaped according to the foundation and formation of race and ethnicity within the U.S. (Weigman, 1995). Furthermore, a majority of film research acknowledges the discriminatory employment practices of the industry (Hill & Gibson, 1998). Race and ethnicity are social constructs enforced to maintain hierarchies. According to Weigman (as cited in Hill and Gibson, 1998), “where ethnicity provides the means for differentiations based on culture, language, and national origins, race renders the reduction of human differences to innate, biological phenomena, phenomena that circulate culturally as the visible ledger for defining and justifying economic and political hierarchies between white and non-white groups” (p. 160). Whether because of ignorance, apathy, or intent, the term “race” is used more often than “ethnicity” when critiquing or differentiating between people, more specifically, characters within film. However, this author’s tentative description of “race” and “ethnicity” holds that they are simply sociocultural constructs and products of discourse concerning power and privilege. Race and ethnicity become increasingly apparent in film through stereotypes depicted on screen.

Silent Era

The most infamous film in this era was D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). This black and white film vividly displayed all 5 of the most prevalent stereotypes discussed in the previous chapter, made a spectacle of the African American male as a rapist, and was a perfect exemplification of the Black Buck stereotype, an uncontrollable sexual character’s lust for white women (Hill & Gibson, 1998). The film also provided reasons behind lynching and was a justification for hate crimes toward African Americans. Furthermore, because of the way this film was shot and directed, it was used for decades as a recruiting tool by the Klu Klux Klan because of its effectiveness in inciting hatred towards Americans. Ignorant viewers saw this manipulative film as a realistic presentation of truth because of Griffith’s “historical reconstructions” of real events (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). The film also had depictions of the Mammy and Uncle Tom figures. They were shown as the few “good Negroes,” but they were overshadowed by the “bad Negroes” or the Black Bucks. In addition, it was common in this era

for Black characters to be played by white actors in *blackface*. Wong (1978, as cited in Hill and Gibson, 1998) would refer to *blackface* as “role segregation,” which is “the way in which non-white actors are, by virtue of their race, ineligible for certain kinds of roles, while white actors are able to move ‘horizontally’ into even those roles racially defined as Black, Asian, Native American, or Chicano” (p. 163). African Americans were used only as extras in the background scenes. They would appear in unruly mobs and apparently did not have families. These depictions of minorities as animalistic and with limited to no sense of “real” family allowed audiences to be less sympathetic and more justified in their prejudices against them; some might argue that there are some similarities with historical representations and today’s “hood” films like *Menace II Society* (1993), *Juice* (1992), and *Don’t Be A Menace In South Central While Drinking Your Juice In The Hood* (1996) (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). Furthermore, anxiety around miscegenation was demonstrated by role segregation by enabling non-white roles to be played by white actors in stories regarding interracial sexuality (Hill & Gibson, 1998). This helped to avoid more realist representations of inter-racial sexual desire. African Americans were living under severe social prejudice restrictions in 1915 when *The Birth of a Nation* was released. The Jim Crow Laws of that time dictated the ways Black people were to receive unequal treatment in the South, while in the North it was less “legally inscribed” but still very apparent in everyday life (Hill & Gibson, 1998).

The Shift

By the 1930s and 1940s, African Americans were able to receive more supporting roles, although still being cast in stereotypical roles. This was partly because of the Motion Picture Production Code, which was a set of film industry censorship guidelines that governed what was acceptable and what was not acceptable from 1930 to 1968. Benshoff and Griffith (2004) argue that the limited range of African American images presented in Hollywood films grew even smaller after the enforcement of the Code because the presence or indication of miscegenation versus interracial scenes was forbidden (which minimized the Tragic Mulatto depictions) as were hypersexual images common to the Black Buck stereotype. Therefore, Black actors were kept in supporting roles or in roles reflecting acceptable stereotypes in an effort to minimize criticism from prejudiced audiences who refused to watch an entire movie about an African American,

and especially an African American who was strong, smart, and independent (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). Fortunately, some Black actors were able to make the best of their supporting roles by turning their small parts into memorable performances. These characters represented themselves with dignity and self-respect, to the best of their ability. Hattie McDaniel, for example, was able to win an Oscar for her role as Mammy in *Gone With the Wind* (1939).

During the 1940s as World War II was fought and segregation even within the military was vividly apparent, many people in the United States believed racism in the U.S. needed to be examined. It has been noted that “the stereotypes of African Americans that *The Birth of a Nation* had capitalized upon became Hollywood’s usual way of representing African Americans until the end of World War II” (Hill & Gibson, 1998, p. 82). So, the federal government and Hollywood took the initiative to encourage African Americans to become involved in the war effort in films like *The Negro Soldier* (1943). This particular film assumedly was made to help educate the population about social issues, eradicate racism in the ranks, and explain to Blacks why they should fight. The NAACP and other groups interpreted Hollywood’s gesture less positively and instead raised awareness of racial discrimination by petitioning Hollywood to make more diverse, less stereotypical representations of African Americans, and especially representations of African Americans as happy, docile servants (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). The various films that were made in the late 40’s that began to tackle social problems and racism in America did so from a white point of view (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). In addition, passive imagery of African Americans in roles such as the Mammy or Uncle Tom character started to run its course, especially by the mid-1960s.

Blaxploitation Films-The Precursors to “Hood” films

African Americans yearned for images of Blacks fighting back or resisting. They had grown weary of the slow pace progress regarding the civil rights movement. For many filmgoers, the Hollywood films of Sidney Poitier, Hattie McDaniel, Stepin Fetchit and other Black actors/actresses who epitomized going-slow or careful integration, were either an anachronism or an outright embarrassment in the eyes of the younger Black generation (Reid, 2005). Independent films like *Sweet Sweetback’s Baaadasss Song* (1971) by African American filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles generated increased enthusiasm. The film starred a Black

character who was a hustler, sexual stud, and a “justified” white cop killer who escapes to Mexico with the help of the Black and Hispanic communities. The film generated a large amount of positive feedback from its viewers like Huey Newton, leader of the Black Panthers, who called it “the first Revolutionary Black Film” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 86). Not surprisingly, when Hollywood saw the profits that this particular film made, they began to produce their own films about urban Black protagonists, which collectively became known as blaxploitation films (Berlowitz, 1981). “These films exploited African American audiences in that they took money out of African American communities to fill white Hollywood’s bank accounts... [they were] cheaply made and sensationalistic that [drew] audiences [in] by promising gratuitous amounts of sex and violence” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 86). It is conjectured by this author as well as by Benshoff and Griffin that Hollywood was actually exploiting Black youth who started to dress and act like the negative lead characters because, African American middle-class adults began to decry the negative images that youth found inspirational. This showed the impact of films that used Black culture and sold. Hollywood’s blaxploitation films fell under the genre formulas of gangster, crime thriller, and horror movie, in which the Black characters were violent, flashy, and charismatic. Fortunately (and unfortunately,) African Americans were able to find work helping to make these pictures, despite the fact that white men were still writing and directing a majority of these films. Some critics claimed that the violent blaxploitation hero was an extension of the Black Buck stereotype that left no room for complex female characters, making the latter quite sexist (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004).

Up-and-coming African American Hollywood filmmakers (once independent filmmakers) like Spike Lee, who created *Malcom X* (1992), attempted to combat these negative portrayals by creating films that explored a variety of aspects of the African American experience (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). Other “true” independent filmmakers who did not have the support of Hollywood (specifically when it came to funds and distribution) and who made similar attempts to raise awareness of the African American experience unfortunately did not gain as much recognition. In other words, “African American films that find wide audiences are the films that Hollywood itself allows to be produced and distributed. Consequently, these films mostly follow Hollywood formulas and rarely challenge or address the dominant structuring

ideologies of white patriarchal capitalism” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 91). *Menace II Society* (1993), the focus of this paper, is a prime example of one of the films that was at the mercy of Hollywood. The major difference today is that African American men create and direct these films, which leads some critics to view them as a sort of *neo-blaxploitation* (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004; Reid, 2005). These films are astoundingly similar to those of the 1970s in which violence and gangsters are glorified, whether this is the director’s intention or not. Sexism and homophobia are clearly evident, creating increased concern. One also notices that there is a lack of female and LGBT characters in “hood” films.

Brief insight on today’s films

It may seem odd that the author decided to focus on *Menace II Society*, a 1993 film, instead of a more recent film. Unfortunately, representations of African American youth today are limited, and the films produced in the 1980s and 1990s are frequently shown on television networks like *BET*. As has been the case with women and homosexuals in previous gangster/violent genre films, as Hollywood would describe them, representation of African American youth in today’s films seems to be slowly diminishing. When they are portrayed, they may be extras or dichotomized into either good or evil, eliminating any potential range for that character. The most recent films that have attempted to represent Black youth in film include *The Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), *Precious* (2009), and *The Blind Side* (2009) among others. This author contends that out of these three particular films, Tyler Perry’s *The Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, along with his other films, have explored the multiple aspects of the African American experience today with a majority Black cast. The Black characters shown have a wider range (although still stereotypical at times) of emotion, mindset, gender and behavior, and are not categorized as simply either good or bad, gangster or rapper, violent or non-violent. Some would argue that these films perpetuate negative stereotypes just as “hood” films do. *Precious*, directed by Lee Daniels, starred an African American female teen who is uneducated, overweight, and frequently raped and abused by family members. She then manages to disassociate from the family (the mother and father) at the end. The audience does not receive the opportunity to see if she makes it out of the “hood” or if she can survive on her own with her two children; instead, it is left up to the viewer to fill in the blanks after viewing solely the

heartaches and trials this character goes through growing up in the “hood”. In other words, negative depictions concerning Black youth are prevalent within this particular film without uplifting images *on screen* to help combat the previously negative imagery, leaving audiences to create their own interpretations. John Lee Hancock’s *The Blind Side* focuses on an African American male teen who is not very educated, keeps to himself, is homeless, and is the product of a broken home, which is arguably very similar to the premise of *Precious*. It is not until a white family rescues the poor Black character that he can then find relief from life’s troubles. Unfortunately, with this limited amount of representation of Black youth in film, it is not a surprise that “hood” films like *Juice*, *Boyz in the Hood*, and *Menace II Society* are the preferred choice of young African American viewers. Frighteningly, limited and sparse imagery of Black youth in film speaks volumes and should raise questions among directors, writers, and viewers.

Racism is an institutionalized element in Hollywood film and is the effect of complex histories and representational forms (Hill & Gibson, 1998). Taking a look at a few of the primary issues and imageries (regarding Drugs/Crime, Family, and Education) illustrated in the “hood” film *Menace II Society* through the use of a framing analysis may provide explanations or a better insight into why many filmmakers reluctantly portray Black youth in films. It can also explain how negative, limited, or non-existent portrayals and messages affect Black youths’ perceptions of self as well as how they in return compare themselves to their peers.

Chapter 3: Crime and Drugs/Alcohol

Introduction to Crime and Drugs/Alcohol

African American adolescents who grow up in less fortunate situations like a crime infested neighborhood with no adult role model or lacking education tend to be pessimistic about their futures. This may manifest itself in forms of violent and aggressive behavior (Reese, Vera, Thompson & Reyes, 2001). According to this particular “hood” film, violent behaviors also are linked to a youth’s peer group; the risk for adolescent delinquency increases with association with other delinquent peers. These youth look for any way to survive, even if that means engaging in a drug war (for income or power). Arguably, framing may occur when the media thrive on the negative viewpoints/portrayals by perpetuating them in scenes in *Menace II Society*, for instance.

Framing

This chapter will analyze messages in *Menace II Society*, contingent to this author’s topic, regarding crime and drugs/alcohol by identifying distinguishable frames. As a newly developed form of analysis, there is no one coherent methodological approach to conducting a frame analysis; rather, frame analyses are a number of related and sometimes unrelated methods (Scheufele, 1999). Framing, as noted earlier, is “the process by which a communication source, such as news organization, defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy” (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997, p. 221). Streeter (2009) further defines frames as “principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (p. 1). Although framing is commonly used in political agendas and marketing (e.g. advertising and political rhetoric), it is also a tool for interpreting discourse and creating more effective communication. In a framing study of *Menace II Society*, the goal simply is to understand what frames are established and their possible interpretations. This author will establish the master frame(s), which would basically be the single prominent message that people walk away with from this particular film, as well as sub-frames that may be used for additional support of the particular master frame. The message(s) are often negotiated between the

filmmaker's intention and audience's interpretation. Master frames, particularly, try to evoke a larger sense of importance and focus to certain issues, while sub-frames further support the particular frame/issue. Identification of these frames will be followed by an example from a specific scene in the film and connections/interpretations drawn as they relate to the frame being discussed.

1st Master Frame: Fear and Dislike of the Black Youth

It is clear that background knowledge also influences one's understanding and interpretations. For instance, if an individual hears that a large number of Black youth tend to be in jail because of drugs or crime (according to the news media) this will influence how he or she views *Menace II Society*. In this particular case, the first major frame deals with the pertinent message that Black youth are to be feared or disliked. This film implies that Black youth tend to be violent and always involved with drugs/alcohol, which may be reasons for the supposed fear/dislike. This was evident throughout the film, but mostly in the depictions in the opening scene.

The opening scene of *Menace II Society* sets the tone for the movie through its on-screen illustrations. Kevin, who is often referred to as O'Dog, and his close friend, Caine, are seen walking into a convenience store presumably owned by individuals of Asian descent. Keen viewers will also notice an older Black male at the cash register paying for his items when the two young boys walk in. As the two boys pass this older Black male, his attention becomes increasingly focused on them rather than on gathering his items and his demeanor also changes. It is a quick film cut, but this potentially indicates to viewers that even Black adult males become more wary when Black youth are near for whatever the reason may be. Although O'Dog and Caine did not seem to notice the adult Black male staring, O'Dog did sense a woman of Asian descent following him and his friend around the store (as if to make sure they did not steal anything). As this continues to happen, O'Dog becomes irritated and belligerent and makes obscene gestures. This escalates after the man of Asian descent behind the counter, frightened, tells O'Dog to "hurry up and buy and get out" and later whispers as the two walk out of the store that he feels sorry for O'Dog's mother. O'Dog reacts to the last comment by shooting them, robbing them, and running away with the security tape. Frantically, Caine, shocked by all of the

events that occurred so quickly in front of him, drops the glass beer bottle that he just bought and also runs out of the store. The audience is left hearing Caine's voice-over explain that is how his summer started: "one never knew what was going to happen in the 'hood'".

1st Sub-Frame: Minorities fear of other minorities (Black youth)

The interesting thing about this scene is that from the moment the two main characters enter the convenience store, the adult Black male customer and the two workers of Asian descent were on alert and guard-like, following the Black teens' (O'Dog and Caine's) every move with their eyes and walking directly behind them. It is this author's contention that it was the intent of the filmmakers' to exaggerate the fear others have of Black youth. A sub-frame that helps further support this master frame (regarding the dislike/fear of Black youth) would be that after Caine found himself in trouble again, a young boy around the age of six was seen explaining to his mother that he heard white cops do not like Black people. These two scenes indicate to young Black viewers that it is not just the assumed dominant white culture that fears or dislikes African American youth or African Americans in general; other minority groups and to a certain extent, adult African Americans, are afraid as well. The idea of African Americans' also fearing/disliking Black youth is brought to question and is definitely an area that needs to be further explored.

If fear and dislike are common perceptions of today's Black youth, one can only conjecture that this has to do with the perpetuation of certain stereotypes or depictions of African Americans (such as these particular scenes) that not only influence dominant cultures' view of a particular group (specifically regarding African Americans), but also the views of one ethnic minority group toward another. According to these particular scenes, negative views and stereotypes regarding African American youth have permeated various cultures, minorities, and age groups. This author contends that based on the previous interpretations of the particular scenes, this teaches youth that they are presumably disliked by nearly everyone and are under constant surveillance regardless of the situation; therefore, they are "permitted" to act accordingly, even if that means acting aggressively in an attempt to gain minimal respect or attention.

This disapproval by others encourages the competitive spirits of African American youth to survive any way they deem appropriate. The Asian American shopkeepers in *Menace II Society* did not even ask for proper identification from the youth for the beer they were buying nor did they choose to maintain eye contact; they just wanted them to pay and leave. Additionally, the viewer is unaware of, either through internal narrative or flashback scenes, prior interactions between the presumed Asian American owners and the two Black youths/customers that may have led to their feeling uneasy, nor do they know whether the Asian American owners treated every customer the way that they treated the two African American youths. Instead, the film simply opens up introducing the audience to the “typical” menacing Black youth through the imagery of the aggressive Black Buck stereotype. The Black youth were seen wearing baggy pants (below the waist), using profanity, carrying a firearm, and buying liquor, which are typical characteristics of a menacing Black youth according to “hood” films. The characters’ style of dress indicates to Black youth how they should dress, ultimately setting a tone for the film. This scene further indicates to Black youth that violence and aggression are acceptable ways to gain respect when others display a lack of respect toward them.

The messages from this particular scene depicting Black youth as children to be feared and monitored affect today’s Black youths’ perceptions of themselves because they may believe they are not worthy of respect in general and need to compensate by acting aggressively or violently. This author conjectures that this mentality and such scenes enable Black youth to simply play the victim role, rather than motivating or encouraging them to rise above the general disapproval of others. In other words, these scenes ultimately condone aggression by Black youth and the decisions that they deem appropriate to handle negative situations, according to this writer. The scene also condones others’ views of Black youth as menaces to society. Black youth are constantly exposed to violence, according to “hood” films, whether it is conducted by a family member, family friend, the media, or peer(s); so it may be imperative that Black youth gain problem solving techniques.

2nd Sub-Frame: The role of peer influence

Peer pressure and violence tend to be closely linked in “hood” films. It is apparent in *Menace II Society* that the norms, values, and practices of the peer group affect the nature of the

peer influence. In other words, if the norms of the peer group consist of stealing, fighting, using inappropriate language, and unjustly killing others when a member thinks that he or she has been wronged, these values/activities impact each member of the particular peer group accordingly. Inevitable norms arising from comparisons to others within the same group help to establish or evaluate status within the group (e.g. who should be the leader or who has the most influence over the group). Because of the constant need to feel included, member comparisons are always taking place so that one avoids feeling left out of the group, even if that means acting violently toward another group or person(s) in an attempt to gain (or regain) recognition or affirmation within their own group. *Menace II Society* further illustrates this example through Caine's character. It is this notion that an act of violence toward another group or person(s), which fuels continual support and status recognition within one's own peer group, that makes up the premise for the second sub-frame. This particular sub-frame further serves as an explanation of why Black youth are feared/disliked, according to this film. Often with the help of peer influence, Black youth are shown to mindlessly act or react to situations, disregarding potential consequences.

Soon after Caine had been graduated from high school, he had the unfortunate experience of watching his cousin, Harold, die from multiple gunshot wounds to various parts of his body. As Caine tried to exit the car to escape the bullets, he was shot in the shoulder. A group of friends nearby heard the gun shots and quickly tried to come to the aid of Harold and Caine as the shooters drove off. It was clear that Harold was not going to make it and would die at the scene, so the group decided to rush Caine to the hospital, leaving one friend behind to stay with the cousin. Fortunately, Caine survived the disaster, but the names and addresses of the people who committed the atrocity against Caine and his cousin quickly circulated the neighborhood. Neighbors were eager for Caine's response; to them, seeking revenge was the only answer. Peer pressure and rashness influenced Caine to seek revenge. When the day comes, the viewer notices that Caine seems slightly reluctant and scared. He refuses to shoot innocent bystanders, old people, or children, which makes O'Dog irritated. O'Dog reminds Caine that the assailants shot and killed his cousin. After Caine and O'Dog follow through with the crime, Caine is seen lying in the dark in his bed reflecting on his actions. What he realizes is that killing the "bad guys" did not make him feel any better; it just allowed him to realize that he is capable of killing someone.

This seems to be an honest realization made by Caine, and is a valid message that should be used to evaluate the actions of other characters in “hood” films and even the actions of today’s youth. If acting aggressively or violently toward another person or group of people does not necessarily make the individual feel better, the question then becomes, what are the reasons that Black youth will continue to engage in these acts? The answer partly draws back to peer influence. Although certain negative acts (e.g. killing another individual) may not make the individual feel better about the particular situation, these acts allow for an alternative increase in social status and acceptance within a peer group. In other words, violence/revenge permits supposed “closure” for the wronged action, but also increases acceptance in one’s social group. For instance, after O’Dog shot the Asian convenience store workers, he retrieved the tape with the evidence and showed his friends, who glorified in his actions and watched in amazement. His actions indicated to his peers that he was one to be feared and respected. Other minorities or groups that watch these scenes may also draw the conclusion that Black youth in general are ones to be feared.

Revenge is not necessarily conducted in vain or for “minimal” offenses (which tend to be arbitrary and contingent upon the character/person, according to “hood” films). Oftentimes, it is assumed that the wronged person is significant to the avenger. Therefore, acceptance from the avenger’s peer group increases in value, since they are sometimes needed for extra support or to back up the one seeking revenge. One’s peer group can take the role of an extended “family” especially when individuals close to them are wronged or violently killed by outsiders. It also is apparent that these “families” depicted in “hood” films regard respect, honor, and loyalty as values that need to be adhered to by the group members. When such a value or an attribute is lacking in an individual, the rest of the members will inform him or her; that is where peer pressure is evident. Just as with a conventional nuclear family, if one member is not pulling his or her own weight or adhering to the established rules of the house, they oftentimes are informed and that individual will have to conform his or her behaviors to the norms. Further discussion regarding family is found in the next chapter.

2nd Master Frame: The Triangle- Substance Abuse, Violence, and Peer Pressure are Intertwined

Although loyalty and family are valued in most settings, not all peer influences are so positive. Sometimes, certain standards held by one member of the group are not as valued by the other members who may, in effect, feel obligated to cooperate because of the influence of peers of higher status within the group or in the anticipations of future support. Negative influences also inevitably play a role in substance abuse and aggressive behavior, according to *Menace II Society*. Substance abuse can be easily intertwined within this triangle of violence and peer pressure among youths. In other words, within a peer group, one can easily be influenced to engage in drugs and violence or the pressure of using drugs may resort to one engaging in violent activities. This is the premise for the 2nd master frame.

Based on depictions in *Menace II Society*, there is an apparent influence of drugs on violent behavior. In addition, drugs were present during acts of violence and delinquency, which leads this author to conjecture that the connection between drug use and violence is moderately strong. The film has a variety of scenes in which alcohol and drugs are easily associated or present in the midst of violence.

A memorable scene was a flashback of Caine as a toddler. His parents often held adult parties at the house in which drugs, alcohol, and firearms were present. Some adults, Caine's mother among them, would spend time smoking cocaine in different areas of the house, while others would gamble or sit outside on the porch. Although Caine at that age was told to stay in his room, he would sneak out to the porch where the older children would congregate. Caine would try to partake in the activities, such as drinking alcohol or holding a gun. Fortunately, Caine's mother found him the night that the older children attempted to show him how to handle a gun, and demanded that he returned to his room. As Caine continued to watch the activities from his room, he realized that his father, Tat, and another man, who remained nameless, were gambling and got into a dispute regarding the payment of money. The nameless man, who was not intimidated by Tat, told him he would give him his money whenever he felt like it. Out of anger and to save face, Tat pulled out a gun and threatened to shoot the man. Unfazed by the gun, Tat pulled the trigger, killing the man right in Caine's view. Instead of feeling remorse or shock, he waived the gun around asking the other members at the table if they owed him money also. This was his way of trying to gain respect among his peers and maintain his masculinity.

Audiences later find out that Caine's father was killed during a drug deal and his mother died from a drug overdose.

The viewer, at this point, notices similarities in the mentality, actions, and values of African American men and youth. In other words, the mentality of possessing and using a gun to get a point across is not age biased, nor is the mentality of not wanting to be shown disrespect in front of peers or in one's home limited to solely Black male adults. Unfortunately, by the time the viewer notices the use of firearm in the dispute at hand, there is already evidence of either drugs or alcohol, suggesting that they may play a role in his judgment at that particular moment. The question thus becomes, (as seen in the opening scene where the adult Black male was on alert when Caine and O'Dog walked into the store) could this particular reaction (or any other Black adults' reaction) be due to the fact that Caine and O'Dog may be a reflection of him, which would account for this sort of fear or heightened attentiveness? In other words, evidence suggests that Black male adults and youth may share similar attitudes towards certain situations; therefore, the Black adult in the store may have been on alert because he understands the youths' capabilities if they are wronged.

3rd Master Frame: Black youth should be content in not striving to do better or become more effective participants in society

Unfortunately, films rich in drug and crime imagery such as those previously discussed do not have many scenes that encourage Black youths to overcome obstacles or even believe in themselves. For instance, at the end of the film when Caine and some of his other friends make an attempt to move out of the "hood" and change their lives, nearly half of them are killed by drive-by shooters seeking revenge. Interestingly, the only people to survive were the characters safe in the house, a young child who was covered by Caine's body, and O'Dog.

O'Dog is described consistently throughout the film as "America's worst nightmare." He does not think about consequences, celebrates in seeking revenge, and enjoys abusing drugs and alcohol, and in the end, he is the only one outside to survive the shooting. O'Dog also was the only character to denounce Caine as a "sellout" for wanting to move. Whether O'Dog was joking or regretting that his best friend was moving is not of primary concern. The ending does not suggest to young viewers to do better or to leave a toxic environment; instead, the message can

be interpreted that one should learn to deal with the environment and settle. Caine was reluctant to leave, but was willing to give it a try, which ultimately led to his death. Although Caine never verbally expressed to his peers or audience that he was leaving, his actions at the end of the film exemplified his willingness to move out of the toxic environment, which was example of how the concept of mimesis was used. The conclusion of this film seems to be that wanting more is simply a false hope, and one can never really escape his or her reality. Overall, depictions of drugs and crime as described in previous scenes not only impact Black youths'/viewers' mentalities, but also dictate how others perceive Black youths and their peer groups.

Chapter 4: Priming As A Theoretical Explanation

As discussed in the previous chapter, the film suggests that youths exposed to violence (whether they are innocent bystanders or victims) are at an increased risk of later engaging in violent behaviors. Particular scenes indicate that cognitive schemas of the world's being a hostile place are quickly developed and violence is seen as simply a norm. When a child grows up in a hostile or underprivileged environment where drugs and violence are commonplace and then watches similar scenes in a film, it may trigger the violent seed that was previously planted from real life, which may arguably be referred to as an example of "priming." Occurrence of priming is believed to occur outside of conscious awareness, which is different from memory that relies on direct retrieval of information; instead, priming relies on implicit memory and can be very salient and long lasting (Dewey, 2008). The primary focus of this chapter will be to examine and discuss when and where priming occurs in *Menace II Society* (specifically in regard to family and education) and examine its potential impact on viewers, specifically Black youth.

According to Jacobi (1983), the effects of priming can impact one's decision-making process, which makes it understandable why youth would consider imitating inappropriate actions that prove to work within the film, with hopes of obtaining similar results. For instance, Caine as a young boy witnessed his father's selling drugs as a means to help support the family; as a teenager he then also started selling drugs as a means to help support his close friend's family (whom he took care of as his own). Young Black viewers who may live in a drug-infested environment may relate to the situations illustrated on-screen in spite of the consequences of their inappropriate actions. In effect, young Black viewers also may fall into the trap of desiring to imitate the film character's negative actions hoping to reproduce similar results, even if it means selling drugs for temporary survival or in an attempt to help support family or friends. Unfortunately, there are not many depictions on-screen that provide alternative solutions, except for leaving the neighborhood, which (as discussed in the previous chapter) some characters later choose to do.

Adhering to the "All-American" Family Structure

Despite the negative influence of drugs and alcohol, individuals tend to view family as a haven. Regardless of the situation, they can normally always find support or security in knowing

that family will be there during hardships. Members of the family take on different roles in an individual's life, whether it be an emotional supporter, counselor, entertainer, provider, or motivator. The historical belief that the ideal family structure consisting of a man, a woman, and children all living in the same house is still profoundly evident today (Vereen, 2007). Families who do not emulate that structural belief, like many African American families, often are victims of negative stereotypes or perpetuated myths (Vereen, 2007). Unfortunately, African American families who adhere to the "ideal" structure tend to be portrayed as "dysfunctional" and with limited values, according to "hood" films. For instance, it is common to see images of a one-parent African American household in which the absence of a father figure is typically either because he is in prison, dead, or simply has abandoned the family. The absence of a mother figure is typically either because she is addicted to drugs, dead, or deemed an "unfit" mother. Priming can occur in this particular instance because young Black viewers may have grown up in similar family structures, and depictions of single parents or a drug addicted family member only serve to trigger implicit memories. For instance, feelings of neglect or anger may be triggered when a child who witnessed his/her father abusing alcohol on a daily basis watches similar scenes from "hood" films.

Historically, diminishing images altogether of African American families created estrangement between white audiences and Black characters, enabling less sympathy from dominant viewers and more dehumanized outlooks toward African Americans (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). This was partly because viewers wanted to believe that African Americans were incapable of possessing a sense of family or family values. Conversely, current images of dysfunctional African American families, as seen in *Menace II Society*, seem to perpetuate historically dominant views by dehumanizing African Americans and portraying them as lacking a sense of "family". In other words, historical beliefs and decisions to not portray positive African American families are justified today through illustrations of dysfunctional African American families, specifically in "hood" films. In effect, these images further exemplify to viewers, specifically Black youth, reasons behind the historical and arguably current lack of functional African American family portrayals. This is especially as a result of the increased number of Black single parent homes/families.

Male Dominance and Female Roles

The ultimate strength in resiliency in the roles an individual plays in an African American family is rarely discussed or positively portrayed in film. A child's grandmother or family friend, for instance, may acquire the roles of a caregiver, disciplinarian, motivator, and educator in the absence of a parent. Thus the question becomes, what constitutes a family? According to frequent portrayals in film, members in an African American family are not solely limited to blood relations; rather, they may incorporate close friends or other community members. They are seen as extended family or sometimes the only "family" that an individual acknowledges. Therefore, the definition of family can be quite ambiguous. In effect, "ideal" male and female roles (e.g. who washes dishes or pays the bills) in an African American family tend to be inexact and contingent upon the particular family. Oftentimes, there is an overwhelming male dominance in "hood" films in which family includes male figures/characters. In other words, women are rarely included or depicted in the "close-knit" family. For instance, in *Menace II Society* there were two scenes with Caine's mother included and two scenes with Caine's grandmother included; the two main female "role models" in Caine's life were rarely portrayed and had extremely minor speaking roles. This indicates to youth that the women in their lives are not as significant as the male figures, and this may be another example of where priming occurs. Youth that view these images may soon become even more conscious of the discrepancy of status' within their own family, and depending on the condition of the family, they may conclude that either they are not in a healthy environment or may conclude that that is the way things are supposed to be. The women are seen almost as extended family; they are physically apparent on-screen, but they are merely male shadows or sexual objects.

The use of the *male gaze* is quite evident in "hood" films such as *Menace II Society*. Mulvey's theory suggests that the male gaze occurs when the audience assumes the perspective of a heterosexual man in which a scene may linger on the curves of a woman's body, for instance (Mulvey, 1975). Women often are depicted as powerless or simply as sexual objects. Messages, as illustrated by Mulvey, affect young Black girls' perceptions of themselves. These messages exuded in "hood" films indicate to young Black females that they have limited roles in society and should either be content with depending on a male to take care of them and the family, walking in the shadow of their male counterparts, or assuming the role of a male sexual object.

Although there is one female, Ronnie, played by Jada Pinckett Smith, who does not completely fall into one of these categories, she still is overshadowed by the other clear depictions of women in the shadow and sexual object roles. In the beginning, Ronnie would accept drug money from Caine to help support herself and her son, but the audience notices that she started trying to give the money back to him whenever he would sneak it into her drawer. She wanted to prove that she could manage on her own without relying on his illegitimate money. Analyzing *Menace II Society* has enabled this writer to conjecture that Black adolescent females have very limited illustrations of other successful or positive Black women on-screen (in “hood” films), if they are even portrayed at all. This continuing limited portrayal of successful Black women indicates to Black females that success is merely a dream and constant images on-screen serve to validate this illusion, to an extent, leading to priming effects. This may be a distinct effect resulting from the ineffectual male figure effect.

The first immediate family the audience is introduced to in *Menace II Society* occurs in the flashback of Caine as a toddler, as discussed in the previous chapter. Noticeably, Caine has the “ideal” family structure in which there is a mother, a father, and a child who all live together; yet, the family still is portrayed as dysfunctional. The mother is deemed an unfit mother because she is addicted to drugs and cannot seem to supervise Caine during their “adult parties” at the house. Caine manages to sneak out to the porch with the older children and attempts to participate in the activities (e.g. drinking and learning how to hold a gun). When the mother does find Caine, she sends him back to his room, as if he were a prisoner. At the party, while the mother is engaging in drugs, the father is seen gambling, drinking, and later shoots a member at the table after a minor dispute over money.

These images indicate to viewers that Black families do not seem to have any values or morals. The house is chaotic and the parents have neglected the child. The parents were more concerned about having their own fun that they did not take the time to put young Caine to bed (according to the depictions on-screen). Caine’s father was a part-time cabdriver or plumber, but his main job was selling drugs. In effect, priming occurs when the potential message to young Black viewers is that jobs deemed legitimate by societal standards (e.g. cabdriver or plumber), are not enough to sustain a family or individuals living in similar situations/neighborhoods. In other words, youths who find themselves struggling may quickly embrace these images as

confirmation of the idea that you can be successful selling drugs. Another interpretation/message is that people with legitimate jobs are not as respected as ones who hustle on the street. Simply, to become successful and respected, one should strive to be an exceptional drug dealer. Even after Caine was fortunate enough to be one of the few individuals to graduate from high school, he relied on selling drugs instead of looking for a legitimate job to help support his close friend Pernell's girlfriend and son while Pernell was in jail.

One could argue that even within this "hood" film, the "ideal" family structure is somewhat valued in the sense that in the absence of the head male figure, another male will step in, as when Caine filled in for Pernell. The belief that the male figure is the one who runs the household or is the "man of the house" (male dominant), and therefore should not be questioned, holds true in this film. The perception that the man should be the provider for the family, whereas the woman should manage the house and family, is quite evident, not only in *Menace II Society*, but also today; it serves only to reinforce with dominant cultures beliefs from the 1950s when the *Good Wife Guide: 19 Rules For Keeping A Happy Husband* by the *Ladies Homemaker Monthly*, was introduced. It contained guidelines for women who strived to be a "good wife" such as, "Don't ask him questions about his actions or question his judgment or integrity. Remember, he is the master of the house and as such will always exercise his will with fairness and truthfulness. You have no right to question him" or the final rule which states, "A good wife always knows her place".

Caine's gesture to support Ronnie and her son was thoughtful, but could also be interpreted by young viewers as a critique of women's competence at running a household or surviving on their own; they need the support of men. Caine's father was the provider for the family. It is assumed that the mother did not work because the voice-over mentioned only the father's occupation and then described the mother as a heroin addict. It did not go into detail about what type of woman she was. Instead, the only thing viewers hear is that Caine's father would physically abuse his mother because she would use the drugs before he had a chance to sell them. So not only is Caine's father the provider for the family, but he also has the power to "discipline" or abuse others in the family when they are wrong. Male dominance is evident once again when Caine moves in with his religious grandparents after his parents died. Although Caine's grandfather did not physically abuse his grandmother, the audience notices that she tends

to stay in the background. She has an extremely limited speaking role compared to the grandfather, who disciplines Caine through religious lectures and also is the one to tell Caine he needs to move out in the end. In most of the scenes, the grandmother is silently standing on the side. The viewers conjecture that her silence and sad demeanor mean that she acquiescently agrees with her husband's decisions concerning Caine, even though the audience never hears her express her opinion. The potential message to young viewers in this case is that a woman should always support her man regardless of her personal opinion. In other words, these scenes are all in accordance concerning the message that women should remain silent and unseen, unless directly addressed. This may be an example of priming to those viewers who watch these particular scenes and have witnessed previous situations within their own family where the female figure plays the background role.

Extended Family

As previously mentioned, family is not solely limited to blood relations. According to this film, it is apparent that the immediate family has a major influence on a child at early stages, but by the time the child reaches pre-adolescence and adolescence his or her peers have an increasing influence compared to parents and immediate family. In many cases, the mental transition of thinking of one's peers as solely friends to seeing them as extended family begins here, especially if one's immediate family does not have much of an influence (or positive influence) on the child to begin with. When immediate family members fail to have an influence in the child's life, children are pushed further into the comfort of peers. This is especially true when one's parents fail to protect him or her from trouble and rather steer the child directly into trouble.

Caine was not receiving the nurturing from his parents that was necessary for growth and by the time he was a teenager and living with his grandparents, his peers already started to have an increasing influence in his life. These peers were teaching him how to survive on the streets and in the neighborhood. He grew up admiring the individuals who gained respect from others in the neighborhood and aspired to be like them by selling drugs and owning personal firearms. Older individuals, like Pernell, whom Caine admired also took a special interest in him at a young age, so there was mutual interest between Caine and his older peers. Therefore, it is easy

to see why Caine would look at them as close extended family. It is clear that by the time Caine was graduated from high school his closest friend is O'Dog. They were almost always together and highly concerned about each other's well-being. The first time Caine was shot, O'Dog was extremely concerned. O'Dog was willing to leave Caine's dying cousin at the scene in an effort to save Caine's life. That was the first time that viewers saw a more sympathetic side to O'Dog, unlike his typical menacing demeanor. When Caine recovered, O'Dog was one of the people pressuring Caine to seek revenge. At this point it is unclear if O'Dog wanted Caine to seek revenge for his own personal need to wreak havoc or if it was because he honestly believed it was in the best interest of Caine and wanted to support him. Individuals who believed O'Dog's pressuring to be his way of supporting Caine could argue that O'Dog is simply exemplifying values attributed to being a family member, which include loyalty, support, and desire for respect, to name a few. When Caine's grandparents heard about the previous trouble he had been involved with, the grandfather lectured both Caine and O'Dog, which O'Dog respectfully endured it as if he were part of the family. In the last scene when Caine was about to move out of the neighborhood, but dies from the fatal shootout, O'Dog was by his side once again; only this time, viewers could see that this was the end of the road for Caine. O'Dog was nearly in tears as he watched his best friend die. Caine and O'Dog played together, grew up together, fought other gangs together, and reaped the consequences of their misdeeds together. These two characters exemplified, although negatively, the value of family and sticking by each other's side. Viewers were able to sense that they were not only best friends, but also brothers. Priming in this instance would re-establish to viewers who have experienced similar relationships/friendships in the past that not all peer influence is positive influence; conversely, some friends are capable of maintaining a strong friendship to the point that they recognize each other as family.

Messages from the actions of Caine and O'Dog exemplified the meaning of supporting one another, but unfortunately not in a positive way. Adolescents who have shared similar friendship structures (as with Caine and O'Dog) with their peers may internalize these depictions and reproduce/reintroduce similar actions within their own peer group, and may subconsciously hold group members to the same expectations and values, which would be another form of priming. The idea of standing by another peer/friend's side can often be taken to the extreme, as illustrated in the relationship between Caine and O'Dog. Caine was almost sent to jail because of

his refusal to tell police about the events that occurred at the convenience store in which O'Dog killed and robbed the workers. Granted, some may argue that Caine was attempting to protect himself in the process, but even in this period, viewers would note the infamous "no snitching" rule manifested in this film.

This is the reason it is imperative to understand the messages from such films: it represents an effort to find ways to refute them. Adolescents who watch these images and try to imitate what they see, whether it is building similar extended family relationships or simple friendships, without fully understanding the negative impact of such messages are likely to not only perpetuate these messages/actions, but also to become addicted to the lifestyle. Oftentimes, addiction is associated with drugs and alcohol; but addiction simply deals with *habit*. This writer conjectures that one can become addicted to running from the cops, selling drugs to survive, or resulting to killing as a method of seeking revenge, any of which can become one's "lifestyle".

Education

Education does not just take place at school. It starts at home with learning right from wrong. When children do not have that strong foundation or positive figure in their lives who can set those ground rules before the influence of peers starts to have a major effect, the break down begins. It becomes harder when role models (immediate family) push one directly into harm's way, knowingly or unknowingly. Caine was introduced to drugs, alcohol, and violence at a very young age and could not fully comprehend the events and their impact at that point. His education consisted of learning how to survive and to imitate the older children. It is amazing that he was motivated enough to finish high school despite the events occurring simultaneously in his life. One can only wonder what kind of education he was receiving from school. The audience never sees Caine attend classes nor his interactions in school. Caine's opinions regarding school are never heard nor fully acknowledged in the film, leaving young viewers to assume that school is not very important, especially because Caine mentions in a voice-over that he sold drugs for a living even after school. Family and education go hand-in-hand, to a certain extent. Oftentimes, family is the one to motivate and show one the importance of education. By the time Caine moved in with his grandparents, they were probably the individuals who helped encourage him to stay in school and finish.

Education in school does not merely consist of English, math, science, or other similar mandatory courses. Education teaches youth values such as leadership, cooperation, hard work, believing in oneself, and making positive life decisions. Leadership and individuality are qualities that one should obtain through the process, but when a child is not fully motivated or forgets the life skills learned in school the moment classes end each day, learning is lost. In other words, children may learn skills in school, but increased peer pressure outside of school awaiting them along with the lack of support from family may provoke youth to simply conform or become complacent in their environment. So by the time the child reaches back to school, this author assumes, it is as if he or she is trying to grasp the same skills or concepts over again. The goal for many children is to not become a product of the away-from-school environment. This author contends that education must cultivate a sense of identity that incorporates one's culture and community. Most people set expectations for students in which they will utilize their education to not only help themselves in school and life, but also help the community. Arguably, this does not seem possible unless they comprehend the value of education, are motivated, have a safe learning environment, and have the resources or appropriate learning methods available at school (Sefa Dei, 2008). This includes having teachers who have a true interest in educating youth, and are not solely focused on simply having a job. Disengagement by school officials is disappointing, but youth disengagement poses an bigger problem. Having a physical Black body in school is not enough if the child's mind and soul are absent, which may be the case for many adolescents who find themselves in similar situations as those represented in *Menace II Society*.

It does not help that along with diminishing images of women in these films there are also fewer images of children who appreciate school. For instance, instead of seeing an image of Caine at graduation, viewers see images of Caine simply celebrating at a party in which females are once again portrayed as sexual objects rather than as students who also graduated from high school with Caine. Priming may occur in this particular situation when youth value having fun and partying as more important than education. For example, when teens attend college after viewing similar images depicted in "hood" films, they may have a hard time adjusting or balancing their social and academic life. Subconsciously, they may be more inclined to want to party a majority of the time because they were accustomed to partying when they were in high school and the implicit memory of the images from the film indicate that is what academic life is

generally about. Education also should teach one control, tolerance, and respect for other individuals including women and gay people, who tend to be invisible in “hood” films. Images in this particular film do not foster a sense of diversity or acceptance. Caine’s close friends did not include other ethnicities, sexualities, or genders (except for Ronnie). His close friends were rivals with the Latino groups, who also tended to stick together. These images and messages may provoke intolerance in Black youth and encourage them to evaluate their peers accordingly.

Lacking education and tolerance inhibits necessary skills for life survival that reach beyond one’s environment. It is imperative that people understand the value of family and the impact family has on youth and their education. Black youth who do not receive this support will look to the media and film particularly to help influence their decisions, in which priming becomes increasingly apparent. They may not believe that they have the tools to make it through school. Failure to understand schoolwork can be a barrier; he or she may just cheat or do enough to get by or pass the class, which puts a strain on the child’s personal development. Additionally, lack of self-esteem or understanding in school may manifest itself in a child’s being disruptive in class or regarded as a *special needs* student. There are a number of reasons a child may not do well in school, some of which may involve family and peers. This particular film indicates that there is some form of resiliency and unspoken understanding among the African American family structure that others may not understand. Nonetheless, this author contends that family is still greatly valued in the African American community and shouldn’t be disregarded for the simple fact that they do not emulate the ideal “All-American” family structure. As for messages regarding education in this film, there is an understanding that education can only take one so far in the “hood” and is not as significant as having “street smarts”. In other words, it is almost as if emotions trump intellect because everything around youth can be said to be dysfunctional. “Hood” film images regarding negative messages about African American family structures, influential peers, intolerance of others, and education all play a large role in youth development and need to be further discussed and researched.

There is evidence of social comparison theory when it comes to family and education. In *Menace II Society* peers/friends were seen as extended family. So comparison among groups or extended families was almost inevitable. It was as if each extended family had something to prove and wanted to maintain some sort of identity. The extended family did not want to be

viewed as weak or incapable, so comparison would take place in an effort to maintain a more “positive” status within the neighborhood. When it comes to social comparison theory and education, according to the film, black youth do not value education, especially when they see that it is more common for their peers to drop out and partake in the street life/inappropriate activities. In other words, according to this film, when Black youth see that their peers are dropping out and they start to make comparisons, what they tend to find is that those individuals who have dropped out are making money, buying new cars, buying jewelry, etc. To individuals who are still in school, when they make these comparisons, school tends to be viewed as insignificant because they are not receiving the immediate materialistic gratification that is apparent with those individuals who do not complete school.

Conclusion

Media's priming functions and social comparison theory effectively assisted in the overall results and examination of this particular framing analysis. The occurrence of priming and/or social comparison is evident within each frame. This final chapter will take another look at each of the previous frames and discuss how they would be predicted by priming and/or social comparison theory, followed by concluding thoughts.

1st Frame: The Fear and Dislike of Black Youth

The first frame in this analysis discussed the fear and dislike of Black youth. Social comparison theory is evident within this frame and helped to explain the overall premise. Results indicate that it is not solely the supposed dominant white culture that fears and dislikes African American youth; it is also other minorities including other African Americans. This author contends that Black youth sometimes use fear and dislike from others as an excuse for their negative actions and attitudes, partly because they may view themselves as less superior compared to others. This may be where upward social comparison may take place by Black youth because they realize they are disliked by other groups. So, they would compare themselves to individuals who have a "better" status. In effect, this would have a negative impact on their overall self-perception because they would feel less superior. In other words, youth may recognize the different levels of respect they receive based on various interactions. In effect, it is common for viewers to see a Black youth react nonchalantly in one setting and violently in another. For instance, audience' were introduced to O'Dog in the convenience store where he quickly became belligerent and violent after a remark was made by the Asian-descent store owner concerning his mother; in another scene, O'Dog respectfully endures a lecture from Caine's grandfather about their negative behavior (which showed his capability of staying calm and respectful). The levels of respect received and given by O'Dog vary. These examples indicate that Black youth in fact have a basic understanding of how their interactions relate/impact others, regardless if they are positive or negative. Unfortunately, youth tend to

engage in negative actions for reasons such as gaining/maintaining respect. With this, social comparison theory may become more apparent because as research indicated, youth are in constant need of inclusion (Reese et al., 2001). In other words, being respectful in some settings, whereas not in others, tends to be contingent upon the benefits. For instance, this author conjectures that if an individual feels like an outcast in his or her peer group, he or she may overcompensate in some situations by reacting violently toward another individual if it may help improve his or her status within the particular peer group.

Priming could also help predict this first frame regarding the fear and dislike of Black youth because individuals who have had previous negative experiences or interactions with Black youth may have personal reasons for disliking Black youth. This is especially if an individual had a previous bad experience and then watches a similar situation in *Menace II Society*. Watching scenes that resemble previous real life experiences may trigger old thoughts and emotions. For instance, if a white individual was robbed by a black youth and then watches a similar scene, such as the convenience store robbery in the movie, this may trigger old emotions and lead the individual to make unnecessary generalizations.

2nd Frame: The Triangle-Substance Abuse, Violence, and Peer Pressure are Intertwined

The conclusion from this frame indicates that there is a connection between substance abuse, violence, and peer pressure. In other words, within a peer group, one can easily be influenced to engage in drugs and violence, or the pressure of using drugs may resort to one engaging in violent activities. *Menace II Society* suggests that there is a strong relationship between drug use and violence. This author further conjectures that substance abuse, whether it is solely selling drugs and/or using drugs, is almost seen as a sign of wealth (to an extent), according to “hood” films. As analyzed in the previous chapters, selling drugs seemed to be more profitable than an actual job that would be deemed acceptable by societal standards. Characters in the film assumed that they could make a legitimate and comfortable living by selling/using drugs. Conversely, violence, especially with the use of guns, could be interpreted

as a sign of power. Depictions indicated that the more violent one became, the more respect and afraid others became of that individual; this may be where social comparison plays a factor. An individual who recognizes this shift in respect/power, which seems to be contingent upon one's level of aggressiveness toward others, may start to assess themselves accordingly. In other words, if one does not feel valued compared to the other members within his/her peer group, he or she may act in various manners in an attempt to gain recognition. This could include acting out in a violent manner or selling/using drugs.

Priming would occur or help predict this frame if an individual had experienced or knew someone that was abusing drugs or someone who acted violently due to drugs/peer pressure and then watches scenes from this film. These scenes would serve to validate or simply correlate with previous experience, triggering implicit memories. This is especially because drugs and violence tend to be closely associated. In other words, similar scenes involving drugs and crime would serve to reiterate this "triangle". It would be the hope of this writer that the response triggered would not be a reflection of their current situation.

3rd Frame: Black youth should be content in not striving to do better or become more effective participants in society

The third frame that was discussed dealt with the idea that black youth should be content in not striving to do better or become more effective participants in society. It is apparent from this research as well as this film that many African Americans are content with living in the "hood" because they feel safer from discrimination, segregation, etc. In addition, "hood" films do not encourage Black youth to overcome adversity in a positive manner or encourage them to believe in themselves. Priming would a better predictor of this frame because those that have experience in unfortunate environments would better relate to the depictions on screen. The images would not only reactivate previous implicit memories, but may also serve to confirm the limitations of one living in such an area. One could argue that social comparison theory could also be a predictor because if a person compares him or herself to his or her peers or others who live in the same/similar environment, they may feel as though there are limited alternatives other

than their current environment or may not even realize that there are other options and simply conclude that is the way life is supposed to be.

4th Frame: Family and Education

The fourth chapter discussed family and education with regard to priming effects. Results indicated that priming could affect the way one viewed his or her family in comparison to the “ideal” all-American family, affect the way one viewed his or her role within the family, impact how one interacts with friends, as well as impact the value he or she places on education. Prior situations/experiences in any of these areas, followed by similar depictions onscreen, would trigger implicit memories. This is how priming could be used as a predictor for these areas. Although the chapter’s primary focus dealt with priming, it can be argued that social comparison theory may also be a predictor of those particular frames (regarding family and education). Results suggest that African American families that do not adhere to the “all-American” family structure are often frowned upon and sometimes ostracized. Social comparison may take place when an African American family or family member starts comparing him or herself to the “ideal” family and family structure. They may try to adjust their lifestyle to fit in with the “ideal” family structure. This is especially if the African American family has an absent father or mother as often is presumed by dominant society. In other words, the “ideal” family structure would be used to evaluate one’s own family to see if they are “normal”, for instance.

Sociocultural Constructs

Race and ethnicity are simply social constructs in place to maintain power and privilege (Hill & Gibson’s, 1998). Black youth comply with the notion that they are simply victims in society without a voice and are merely limiting themselves and playing into the hands of society. One could argue that this is the same for other non-Black individuals who place value on race. Differentiations that are made solely based on innate biological aspects, disregarding one’s culture and national origin, create problems. This leaves minorities in general to fend for

themselves. Once race and ethnicity are not the primary criteria for making differentiations among people, it can be assumed that minority groups will not be excluded as much. A larger issue presents itself when minorities start discriminating against other minorities. These sociocultural constructs cultivate and support racism by allowing differentiations among race and ethnicity to hold as much value as they do. Exemplifications of these differences are often represented in film (as seen in *Menace II Society*) without any hesitation. Some may argue this supports Hill and Gibson's (1998) notion of racism as an institutionalized element in Hollywood film, the effect of complex histories and representational forms. If institutionalized racism is an element in Hollywood film, these films are not only indicating to dominant culture how they should treat minorities, but they also show minorities how to react to other minorities through the use of framing. These frames sometimes tend to be positioned in ways that validate the idea of minorities as less superior, for instance.

The Use of Framing and Priming and Their Importance

Framing analysis proved to be very helpful as a means of examining *Menace II Society* because there has been previous research on the impact of television/media on youth, but very limited, if any, research on the impact of "hood" films on Black youth and its impact on their self-perceptions. In other words, this research was able to analyze the impact of a specific genre. By using a frame analysis, this writer could draw attention to specific key points and issues based on the topic of this paper. Priming further explained certain issues that were introduced by the different frames. This author has concluded that the writer is the mechanism that makes connections for the viewers based on what is seen on-screen and in reality creating a sense of awareness to viewers who can either agree or disagree with the connections established by the writer. Although research from an actual focus group was included to help support frames in this particular research, a limitation would be that actual Black youth were not able to give input or thoughts concerning the frames established by this writer.

Additional studies should evaluate the difference between adult perceptions of the possible messages/frames presented in "hood" films and those of younger audiences.

Researchers should also take into consideration individuals' environments and income. As discussed in the previous chapter, additional research is needed concerning the lack of positive imagery of African American family structures, the influence of peers, and education; these all impact youth development and self-perception.

Final Thoughts

Oftentimes, youths may not even fully understand the consequences of certain actions. As noticed in *Menace II Society*, youths may also underestimate the influence peers have in their lives. They also may not realize the consequences of acquiring a criminal record. The mentality of simply living for the moment (without thinking about later consequences), trying to survive (even if that means robbing or killing another innocent person), and trying to maintain a reputation among peers (even a negative one) further encourages the persistence of crime. Being able to understand that drugs and violence seem to be at least moderately related allows one to understand the role drugs may play in criminal situations. As mentioned before, drugs and violence are seen/used as sign of power and wealth to an extent, according to this film.

Overall, evidence from *Menace II Society* suggests that with the help of stereotypes emerging over and over again, there is an obvious connection between what people see and what people do. Continual depictions of individuals using or selling drugs in *Menace II Society* or other “hood” films creates a loophole for young Black viewers to avoid having to come up with positive methods for survival. Instead, they rely on representations from these films as solutions to their situation(s). In other words, these films affirm and condone antisocial behavior by not giving equal weight to the consequences, thus perpetuating the belief that the benefits from such behavior outweigh the consequences. Therefore, live for the moment, engage in criminal activities, and do not aspire to be positive role models or reach for desired dreams because, according to “hood” films, there is no escape.

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