

An Audience Reception Analysis Field Study: Exploring Second and Later Generation
Latino Viewers' Perceived Realism Appraisals of Latino Fictional Television Characters
in English Language Television Programs

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ABSTRACT

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An Audience Reception Analysis Field Study: Exploring Second and Later Generation Latino Viewers' Perceived Realism Appraisals of Latino Fictional Television Characters in English Language Television Programs (225 pp.)

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This qualitative audience reception analysis explored the cultural believability of fictional portrayals of Latinos in English-language television programs. The informants for this study were predominately second and third generation Mexican Americans, living in the Los Angeles, California area. This research focused on the ways these Latino viewers experienced, interacted with, and assigned meaning to Latino television characterizations. Because these activities do not occur in isolation particular attention was given to the social construction and negotiation of meanings. Reception typically occurs and is discussed in informal settings, so the researcher employed the naturalistic methods of guided conversations and participant observation. During the field study, viewers discussed whether they could imagine a real-life person having similar characteristics to fictional characters on television. Moreover, they communicated the social significance of programs including fictional characters that reflect Latino persons' cultural realities in more inclusive and diverse, yet entertaining ways. Viewers wanted to see more second and later generation Latino characters in scenes where they would have an obvious presence in similar real-world settings. The main finding of this research indicated that the viewers in this field study not only paid close attention to cultural details in characterizations and their believability, they were able to recall these details

after a long period of time, indicating that these details were highly salient in their believability judgments. Most notably, viewers repeatedly conveyed the perception that too often productions emphasized cultural extremes or exaggerations that did not reflect the ways they experienced their Latino identities. They were particularly concerned by the frequent use of stereotypes, the use of exaggerated foreign accents, and the lack of attention to differences in heritage nationalities and heterogeneity of Latino populations. In addition to these critiques, this research detailed viewers' perceptions of production and character development decisions, and included a discussion of believable identity cues productions might use to communicate characters' Latino identities. Specifically, viewers suggested programs might incorporate Spanish in dialogues and believable cultural cues in characters' environments as Americans of Mexican and Salvadorian ancestry.

Approved: _____

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To My Family for their Love and Support

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|------|
| ABSTRACT..... | iii |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | vi |
| CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| Intellectual Curiosity..... | 2 |
| Television Portrayals of Latino Identities..... | 4 |
| Statement of the Problem..... | 10 |
| Viewers and Believability Judgments..... | 12 |
| Conceptualizing Realism Appraisals | 14 |
| Levels of Specificity in Believability Appraisals | 17 |
| Identification with Characters | 19 |
| Guarded Receptions | 21 |
| Overview of the Dissertation | 23 |
| CHAPTER 2: NATURALISTIC APPROACH TO RECEPTION ANALYSIS..... | 26 |
| Naturalistic Methods of Inquiry..... | 26 |
| Land of Television Studios and Disputed Borders | 28 |
| Gaining Familiarity in the Research Scene..... | 31 |
| Identifying Potential Informants..... | 32 |
| Latino Viewers..... | 33 |
| Guided Conversations..... | 36 |
| Participant Researcher..... | 39 |
| Beginning Interviews and Matters of Flexibility | 43 |

| | |
|--|----|
| Challenges of Guided Conversations | 45 |
| Analysis Process | 48 |
| Chapter Summary | 50 |
| CHAPTER 3: BEHIND THE SCENES | 52 |
| TV Professionals Lack Knowledge | 53 |
| Credible Details | 53 |
| Casting Practices | 58 |
| Stuck on One Formula | 64 |
| Proximity to Industry | 71 |
| What Anglo Producers and Writers Want to Portray | 77 |
| Intentional Exclusion | 78 |
| Token Secondary Characters | 81 |
| Not the Targeted Audience | 82 |
| Overreliance on Audience Demographics | 84 |
| Chapter Summary | 86 |
| CHAPTER 4: ON THE SCREEN | 89 |
| Characterizations Life Outside of the Screen | 90 |
| Frustrating Experiences | 90 |
| Normalizing Cultural Assumptions | 93 |
| Viewer Fatigue | 95 |
| Latino-themed Programs | 97 |
| Varied Receptions | 97 |
| Need for Diverse Family Portrayals | 99 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Extreme Characters inspired Negative Reactions | 103 |
| Cultural Believability more than Idealized Portrayals..... | 105 |
| Cultural Believability in the Details | 110 |
| The Dickey Nature of Humor | 116 |
| Intent behind the Humor | 118 |
| Social-Reality Commentary | 122 |
| Genre Matters..... | 125 |
| Creative Control over Comedic Material..... | 127 |
| Chapter Summary | 130 |
| CHAPTER 5: CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT | 133 |
| Portraying Multicultural American Identities..... | 134 |
| Conveying Ethnicity through Cultural Cues..... | 139 |
| Physical Appearances | 139 |
| Given Names and Surnames | 145 |
| Cultural Cues within Program Settings..... | 149 |
| Using Spanish to Convey Identity | 153 |
| Language and Identity Matters | 153 |
| Code Switching..... | 158 |
| Incorporating Spanish and Managing Translations | 162 |
| Chapter Summary | 167 |
| CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS | 168 |
| Cultural Believability Appraisals..... | 168 |
| Salience of Cultural Portrayals in Memory-based Appraisals | 171 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Exaggerated Cultural Differentiations | 172 |
| Addressing Viewer Distrust..... | 175 |
| Developing Culturally Believable Portrayals | 181 |
| Directions for Further Research..... | 186 |
| REFERENCES | 191 |
| INDEX OF TV PROGRAMS AND FILMS | 207 |
| APPENDIX A: LIST OF INFORMANTS | 213 |

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a qualitative account of an audience field study exploring second and later generation Latino viewers' perceptions of the cultural believability of Latino fictional characters in English language television programs. By cultural believability, I am referring specifically to aspects of characterizations that express characters cultural identities, in this case, Latino identities. Because program developers, writers, producers, and directors exercise more creative liberty with fictional characters, fictional characterizations in scripted television programs are the focus of this dissertation. By providing descriptive information and specific examples of the fictional characterizations Mexican American and a few Salvadorian American viewers considered in their believability judgments and their suggestions on the presentation of fictional characterizations, those interested in cultural representations may consider the implications of the findings of this dissertation from both theoretical and production standpoints.

In this introductory chapter, I explain the intellectual motivations behind this qualitative inquiry. Specifically, I explain my interest in the cultural believability of Latino fictional characters, and previous literature concerning Latino portrayals, viewers' realism or believability appraisals as well as viewers' identification with media characters. Lastly, I provide an overview of the coming chapters, with further thoughts regarding the theoretical contributions of this field study.

Intellectual Curiosity

Just as qualitative investigations are “grounded in the realities of other people’s lives” (Morley & Silverstone, 1991, p. 154), most researchers’ intellectual curiosities are motivated by their personal experiences (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Growing up in the Midwest in the late 1970s and 1980s, I was frequently questioned about my identity by strangers, even before they inquired about my name. In grade school, I was often told that I looked “exotic,” which meant “different” or “not Anglo.” In the 1990s, with the changing demographics in the U.S., and the growing Latino population, fewer people asked me about my ethnic/racial identity. Instead, most people seemed to assume I was Latina; and unless, something caused them to question this assumption, they did not ask about my ethnic/racial identity.

When I explain that my late father was non-Latino African American and my mother is Anglo American, people sometimes assume I am denying my Latina/o heritage. In response, I often explain how I think it is “beautiful, to be considered Latina,” that I am “not surprised that people consider me Latina, given my multiracial heritage and my physical appearance.” However, at least initially, people seem to not accept that my late father was African American because my appearance does not fit within their schema for African Americans. These encounters have made me sensitive to the reality that individuals are not always in a position to define their identities because identity assumptions are connected to socially reinforced ideas about physical appearances. Recognizing the social construction of identity, I have learned to embrace my “Latina” identity, as a very real part of the way I am perceived by others. At the same time, I see myself as having multiple ethnic/racial identities, as an African American of interracial

ancestry, as a “Latina,” and as a minority living in the United States. These experiences have heightened my awareness that my physical appearance both gives me access to Latino communities and introduces barriers in these and in other contexts. Cognizant that my knowledge of life as a Latina/o person is the result of my physical appearance and not my familial history, I decided to focus on Latino identities and cultures in many of my research endeavors.

My interest in audience reception largely stems from my attention to the cultural assumptions reflected in fictional portrayals and their intersections with people’s everyday lives. Likewise, there are many stories I could share that would communicate my personal interest in the topic of Latino television representations and the ways they inform social identity judgments. When I encounter strangers who make assumptions about my profession or social position that is consistent with the Latina/o portrayals one observes on television, I cannot help but consider whether television images might have informed their perceptions about my identity. I also cannot help but feel a heightened sense of anxiety when I view stereotypical Latino television portrayals as issues such as the economy, unemployment, foreign outsourcing and immigration bring forth xenophobic opinions and discriminatory actions aimed at Latino persons, something I have also experienced.

In addition to direct personal experiences, much of what one learns about social identities—pertaining to appearances, languages and behavior—one learns from television. These constructed social identities become part of one’s schemas or one’s understandings of the world around them and the cultures that are a part of that world. When television programs frequently include ethnic/racial characterizations that reflect

cultural stereotypes, the repetitiveness of these images allows them to take on a life of their own (Ellis, Streeter & Engelbrecht, 1983).

Fictional information, and more specifically for the purposes of this research, fictional characterizations, contribute to viewers' understanding of empirical reality (Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Shapiro & Lang, 1991; Trotman Reid, 1979). Like factual information, fictional information is stored in our long-term memories. Psychological experiments have found that information that is clearly compartmentalized in one's memories as fictional is incorporated "into judgments and beliefs" (Gerrig & Prentice, 1991, p. 336; Shapiro & Lang, 1991). This blurring between factual and fictional information, as it pertains to social identities, makes the realism of fictional information more important.

Television as a medium through which audiences draw associations between their experiences and that of the fictional characters they view can often propel important social connections or disconnections, depending on how ethnic/racial groups are depicted. When someone meets another person for the first time, they unconsciously or consciously assess their appearance, language and behaviors based on what they believe to be their social identities (e.g. nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, class, professions). Upon these determinations, persons draw from their schemas and assume social identities align with certain behaviors, interests, lifestyles and experiences.

Television Portrayals of Latino Identities

Aware of this, Latino viewers are concerned about the negative ways Latinos are typecast when they are included in English-language television productions (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 1999; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 2000;

Rivadeneyra, 2006). Although Latino fictional portrayals have improved somewhat in recent years, many of the stereotypical images prevalent in films of the 1920s are still evident in television and film productions, as more modern versions of the same typecast characters. In secondary roles, male characters are no longer the “bandits” of the western genre. Now, more commonly, they are the gang members and other types of hardened criminals (Children Now, 1999; Greenberg & Baptista-Fernandez, 1980; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 1999; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 2000; Rodríguez, C., 1997; Rivadeneyra, 2006). Other female and male characters are often still the indiscrete “Latin lovers” and other kinds of sexualized characters, maids and servants. To nearly the same extent, Latino characters in secondary and sometimes in leading roles are still frequently lower-class immigrants from Mexico with heavy accents, continually depicted in ways that ignore their economic and social contributions in the U.S. (Children Now, 1999; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 1999; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 2000; Rivadeneyra, 2006). Although Latino characters are often typecast as foreigners in television programs, persons born in the U.S. are the largest majority of the Latino population, comprising nearly 60% of the Latino population nationally¹ (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004; Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Though these portrayals are not inherently negative, logically, these characterizations have more collective significance when there are few Latino characters on television.

Television images of Latinos as unskilled labors, as uneducated, poor, lazy and criminal, not only fail to give dignity to the many people who work in service positions,

¹ According to 2007 Census statistics there are more than 45 million Latinos in the U.S. (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009).

they also establish a social identity for Latinos as foreigners with limited social mobility. As children viewers looked to television to reflect their ethnic/racial identities and to inspire them with possibilities, particularly in terms of the careers they might pursue (Hoffner, Levine, Sullivan & Crowell et al., 2006; Wright, Huston, Truglio & Fitch et al., 1995). Latino children often find a different reflection of their ethnic and racial identities on television (Children Now, 1999). According to a national survey of 400 Latino, 400 African American, 400 Asian and 400 Anglo children conducted by Children Now (1999), children more readily associate positive attributes with Anglo television characters than they do with minority characters, especially Latino characters, which they described as deviant, poor, lazy and inappropriately humorous.

Rivadeneyra's (2006) research went a bit further than previous studies by asking questions related to similarity assessments, not just whether characters were positive, negative and/or stereotypical. Most of the participants in Rivadeneyra's (2006) study reportedly did not perceive similarities between themselves and *any* of the Latino characters that they were shown in television clips as a part of the study. This is a particularly important finding because it suggests that for the participants there were other dimensions to character/viewer similarity assessments, beyond simply the ethnicity of a character, as Gillespie (2003) has suggested. In other words, simply including Latino characters in a program does not assure that Latino viewers will perceive them as believable reflections of their ethnic identities.

The ways television representations portray minority cultures is of particular importance for the audiences that are represented. By "minority cultures," I am also referring to Latinos as statistically a minority in terms of the percentage of Latino

representations on English-language television. Despite considerable growth over last 50 years in the number of U.S. television-programming outlets, Latinos have remained one of the least visible ethnic groups on English-language television (Greenberg & Baptista-Fernandez, 1980; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Hoffman, 2003; Hoffman & Noriega, 2004a; Hoffman & Noriega, 2004b; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; NCLR, 1997). Unfortunately, many of the Latino characters viewers might see on television are only in secondary or supportive roles (Hoffman, 2003; Hoffman & Noriega, 2004a; Hoffman & Noriega, 2004b; Rodríguez, C., 1997).

Just before the 1980s, the decade some referred to as “the Decade of the Hispanic²,” Greenberg and Baptista-Fernandez (1980) conducted a content analysis of Latino representations in entertainment programs on English language networks during three consecutive prime-time³ seasons in the late 1970s. At the time of the study, Latino actors were hired to play less than 1.5 % of the roles in prime-time entertainment programs, even though Latino persons represented 6-9 % of the total population. Moreover, Greenberg and Baptista-Fernandez found that Latino characters were primarily concentrated in only four programs. However, they predicted portrayals would increase in terms of “incidence and importance” during the 1980s with the rapidly growing Latino population (Greenberg & Baptista-Fernandez, 1980, p. 5). The prominent Latino advocacy organization National Council of La Raza (NCLR) (1997) highlighted a number of similar studies that focused on representations from the 1950s to the 1990s. In

² This is an expression referring to increasing national awareness of the projected growth of the Hispanic/Latino population in the U.S. in the following decade, and beyond.

³ Prime-time television runs from 7:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. in Eastern and Pacific Time zones, and runs from 6:00-10:00 p.m. in Central and Mountain Time zones.

an effort “to promote fair, accurate, and balanced portrayals of Latinos in the entertainment industry,” NCLR established the ALMA Awards in 1995 (NCLR, 2008, para.1). However, their review suggested little change occurred during the mid-to-late 20th century. Instead, representations of Latinos only fluctuated between .05 % and 3 % of all the representations on television (NCLR, 1997). Supporting this conclusion, Harwood and Anderson (2002) found that Latinos were represented in only 2.6 % of prime-time portrayals in 1999, at the close of the 20th century.

More recent studies suggest only slight improvements in terms of the number of Latino characters cast in prime-time programs, particularly in regular reoccurring roles. Studies that examined seasons from the years 2002 through 2004 still suggested that prime-time representations only fluctuate between 3 % and 4 %, during these highly prized viewing hours (Hoffman, 2003; Hoffman & Noriega, 2004a; Hoffman & Noriega, 2004b; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005), notably below the most recent 2007 U.S. Census estimates that suggest Latinos comprise more than 15 % of the population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Census statisticians conservatively project this fastest growing segment of the U.S. population will comprise nearly 20 % of the total population by 2030 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Yet, when the largest cross-section of the U.S. television viewing audience watches television, viewers infrequently see Latino characters on the major English language networks. There is also evidence that many of the Latino characters are still only concentrated in a few networks that carry one or two Latino-themed programs (Hoffman, 2003; Hoffman & Noriega, 2004a; Hoffman & Noriega, 2004b; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005).

In conjunction with the needed growth in Latino representations, the number of Latino Screen Actors Guild (SAG)⁴ members increased nearly 90 % in the 1990s to 4,858 members by the end of the decade. While growth in the number of SAG members might suggest that Latino actors have more employment opportunities, focus groups, survey and interview findings indicated that there are still considerable obstacles to increasing the frequency and quality of representations. Statistically speaking, Latino actors are rarely cast in more than 2 % of television and film roles, significantly less than SAG members of other ethnicities (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 2000).

Not surprisingly, the majority of the actors who participated in the studies were born in the U.S. and more than a third were Mexican American. Their identities, appearances and Spanish-language speaking abilities also presented problems when auditioning for Spanish-language programs or movies. The SAG members surveyed were divided over whether having a Latino surname is a disadvantage when auditioning or trying to get work. The majority of actors surveyed were asked to audition for ethnic roles instead of roles with indeterminate ethnicities. Actors indicated that they encountered casting directors, producers, and directors that primarily wanted actors with “mestizo features” who have Spanish accents, yet the majority of the SAG members surveyed indicated that English was their first language (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 2000, p. 5). Their experiences with casting decisions offer further insights regarding differences between the ways Latino actors perceived their identities and Latino roles. This is a particularly interesting finding because previous audience studies have found that the characteristics that casting directors, producers, writers and directors

⁴ The national actors' union

emphasize are also not consistent with Latino viewers' perceptions of their identity. At the same time, survey findings suggest Latino viewers clearly prefer viewing television programs and films that feature Latino actors, in a more general sense, not in terms of any single heritage-nationality (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 1999; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 2000).

Statement of the Problem

Minority viewers tend to positively or negatively evaluate same ethnicity characters based on whether they are legitimate or authentic representations of their ethnic/racial identity (Jhally & Lewis, 2003; Rivadeneyra, 2006; Ross, 2001). This begs the question: What prompts viewers to perceive similarities between themselves and fictional characterizations on television? Perceived realism literature offers some theoretical explanations pertaining to this question. Yet, surprisingly, few reception studies focusing on ethnic representations include perceived realism or character impression literature.

As D'Acci (1992) suggests, "Notions of representations are connected to notions of reality [because] television representations . . . conjure up notions of one thing standing in for something else" (p. 374). Therefore, when asking questions pertaining to "representations" researchers are essentially suggesting portrayals of groups communicate *real* or *perceived* social identities. Although Rivadeneyra's study (2006) is one of the few audience studies that articulate a connection between representations and viewers' realism judgments, like many other scholars, she seemingly overlooked a considerable body of audience research that considers the complexity of these judgments. Moreover, related literature concerning viewers' identification with characters and

viewers' associations between fictional characters and their real life experiences expresses the need to include these theoretical understandings in audience studies. Likewise, perceived realism literature could also go further in considering differences in perceived realism appraisals of ethnic minority characters, particularly when viewers share the ethnic identity of the character.

Unfortunately, there are only a limited number of empirical studies investigating Latino viewers' receptions of Latino fictional characters. Few audience studies focus on Latino viewers' perceptions of Latino characters in English-language programs. Even less common are studies that focus solely on second and later generation Latino viewers. Moreover, studies that have examined Latino viewers' perceptions of Latino representations in English-language television programs usually involved quantitative surveys. Due to this lack of qualitative reception studies this research explored second and later generation Latino viewers' receptions of the cultural believability of Latino fictional characters in English language programs.

A considerable portion of the time viewers spend informally talking about fictional television portrayals revolves around discussions of their realism or believability (Albada, 2000; Hall, 2003). For instance, viewers might discuss the believability of the familial and romantic relationships they observe in situation comedies with persons in their interpersonal networks. With family members, friends or co-workers most viewers engage in such discussions at one time or another.

While viewers might have diverse perceptions of characterizations, researchers who conduct qualitative reception studies like this dissertation, consider how media texts are often structured to prevent diverse interpretations (Eldridge, Kitzinger & Williams,

1997). Television viewers' awareness of conventional genre practices, typecasting, and other issues associated with representations, influence viewers' receptions or the ways in which viewers interpret the believability of characterizations. Reception studies consider the importance of the contexts in which reception occurs with a particular focus on "the social production of meaning" (Jensen, 1991, p. 137). Cognizant of this, reception researchers consider the interconnections between public and private discourses when seeking to understand the meanings viewers derive from media texts (Albada, 2000; Gillespie, 2003; Saenz, 1992). As with other cultural practices, viewers' receptions are influenced by their socio-cultural experiences, both during and outside of the viewing experience. Viewers rely on their knowledge of television practices and socio-cultural experiences or schemas to interpret television content (Bobo, 2003; Gibson, 2000; Gillespie, 2003; Saenz, 1992). Perceived realism theories attempt to articulate the connection between viewers' believability appraisals and their real world beliefs.

Viewers and Believability Judgments

Fictionalized television accounts and real-world events are thought to be so similar that there is a great deal of audience research that focuses on whether children are able to distinguish the fictionalized world of television from reality (Dorr, Kovaric & Doubleday, 1990; Elliot & Slater, 1980; Greenberg & Reeves, 1976; Hawkins, 1977; Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Huston, Wright, Alvarez, & Truglio et al., 1995; Potter, 1986). Because social learning is thought to occur while viewing television many early perceived realism studies focused on children's perceptions (Greenberg & Reeves, 1976). These studies investigated the influence of perceived realism judgments on children's intellectual development, behaviors, social judgments and beliefs. Hawkins (1977), one

of the earliest of these scholars, defined perceived realism, the concept delineating this field of audience studies, as “the degree to which television is seen as reflecting or resembling the real world” (p. 313). Hawkins further postulated that perceived realism perceptions were influenced by social expectations, or what children believed about real persons and events outside of the television world.

The findings of these studies are somewhat applicable to adults’ judgments because one’s viewing experiences as children develop certain learned ideas persons refer to as adults. While adults are certainly more sophisticated viewers, individuals continue comparing fictional television characters to real-life persons and situations throughout adulthood. Adults tend to evaluate programs based on their believability or realism because they recognize television creators’ attempts to mimic some aspects of real-life in their programs (Albada, 2000). Moreover, adults rely to a certain extent on what they observe in programs “to make sense of real-life situations” (Eldridge, Kitzinger & Williams, 1997, p. 140). For instance, the police dramas *Law & Order* have taglines that suggested the crimes featured in each episode of the multi-spin off franchise were “stories ripped from the headlines.” Here, the message was strongly conveyed that the series strived to depict realistic crimes and realistic police detective work. Likewise, programs such as *ER* or *Grey’s Anatomy*, tried to accurately portray various medical procedures in busy emergency rooms. Even if someone had no prior experience with arrests or emergency rooms, it is still likely that they would have assumptions about the way they would be treated in either case. It is also highly probable that some of their assumptions are based on fictional television portrayals (Shapiro & Lang, 1991; Potter,

1986; 1992). Perceived realism scholars refer to this as the instructional or utility value of television content (Potter, 1986; 1992).

Conceptualizing Realism Appraisals

For more than thirty years scholars have been investigating viewers' realism appraisals from media psychology, social psychology and cognitive psychology perspectives. To explain these appraisals, researchers have presented a variety of different conceptualizations for perceived realism. The magic window theory was among the first of these conceptualizations (Hawkins, 1977). Hawkins and later theorists suggest television acts as a sort of magic window that allows viewers to observe others' realities. In this conceptualization, the realities observed through television, although "not literally real, they are realistic representations or reflections of the way people behave and the way events occur" (Potter, 1986, p. 162).

When Hawkins (1977) established the concept *magic window*, he conceptualized it as the degree to which viewers believed television characters or events were real or fictional. Hawkins identified what he termed an "adult discount" occurrence. Whereby, as children mature in age they begin to more readily recognize the fictional nature of television content (p. 313). He found adults were more willing than children to accept television content as similar to real life. At the time, he concluded that "the general concept of perceived reality might in fact be masking a number of subsidiary concepts, each of which could conceivably develop differently, respond differently to manipulations, and intervene differently in television effects" (Hawkins, 1977, p. 315).

Supporting Hawkins' conclusion, other scholars have identified other conceptualizations to explain viewers' interpretations of the believability of television

content, namely, for the purpose of this research, *similarity*, *probability* and *plausibility*. Previous empirical studies have found that viewers are able to readily provide examples of realistic and non-realistic aspects of media texts when prompted to do so during qualitative inquiries (Hall, 2003). Each of the previously mentioned concepts explains various dimensions of the ways viewers interpret the realism of television content. Nonetheless, it is important to note that media realism judgments are multidimensional and can vary depending on factors associated with the text and viewer. In other words, individual viewers can exhibit evidence of any or all of these judgments when comparing media texts to real-life persons or experiences (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000; Dorr, 1983; Hall, 2003; Huston, Wright, Alvarez & Truglio et al., 1995; Potter, 1986; Potter, 1992). For the purposes of this research, I employ the term believability because it captures the multidimensionality of viewers' judgments. Moreover, it is a term used by industry professionals to discuss whether fictional characters, scenes and narratives are similar to real life, and are probable or plausible (Kubey, 2004).

Perceived similarity assessments consider whether people on television and narratives are similar to real world people and events (Albada, 2000; Dorr, 1983; Hall, 2003; Hawkins, 1977; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Hoorn & Konijn, 2003; Potter, 1986; Weintraub Austin, Roberts & Nass, 1990). In such assessments, the viewer recognizes that the depictions are fictional yet perceives that they are similar to real-life, even if they are not similar to their own experiences. In general, persons tend to perceive greater similarity when they share demographic similarities with characters (e.g. ethnicity, race, gender, age, geographic locations) (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). At the same time, demographic comparisons are not the only basis for one's similarity appraisals (Cohen,

2001). As Saenz (1992) suggests, viewers are keenly aware of television's ability to provide "stories outside [their] immediate world" (p. 39). In this regard, one's perceptions of realities contribute to their believability appraisals. Persons typically approach the viewing experience with curiousness or openness to new experiences. Nonetheless, this curiousness or openness has some boundaries because people rely on culturally-laden assumptions to interpret the believability of characterizations (Hoorn & Konijn, 2003). For instance, a viewer's interpretations of the appropriateness of a character's behaviors depend on their assumptions about normative behaviors.

Probability and plausibility conceptualizations refer to persons' appraisals as to whether the events depicted are possible or probable in real life, outside of the media portrayal (Dorr, 1983). Even when watching a biographical depiction, viewers sometimes interpret the characterization or narrative as unrealistic when it conveys an unlikely experience (Hall, 2003). Hall (2003) found these conceptualizations were evident in viewers' responses during focus group discussions of reality program clips of *Survivor* and *Temptation Island*. Using these conceptualizations, one distinguishes the realism of texts, relating their judgments to whether, for instance, a narrative event was likely to happen in real life (Hall, 2003). Hall's (2003) focus group participants also discussed examples of sitcom characters' behaviors and the implausibility of persons behaving in a similar manner in real-world family situations. Moreover, viewers remarked on the incongruence between some sitcom characters' standards of living and the characters' occupations. Focus group participants reportedly also discussed the plausibility of characters' relationships outside of the context of a television program. To support their

conclusions, viewers referred to other television programs, their cultural assumptions and experiences, and information they gleaned from other individuals (Hall, 2003).

Levels of Specificity in Believability Appraisals

Believability appraisals can involve different levels of specificity (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000; Hall, 2003; Hoorn & Konijn, 2003; Potter, 1992). Viewers recognize that production techniques, commercial interests and entertainment motivations limit the realism of media characters. While it is unclear which elements viewers expect to have greater realism, and why, studies have found believability appraisals vary depending on the object of their focus—television in general, the genre, a character, a narrative or scene, or elements of the character and narrative (Busselle, 2003; Busselle & Greenberg, 2000; Potter, 1992).

Social psychologists theorize that viewers use their prior knowledge of the way television narratives typically group actions to interpret characterizations. These actions are often related to the genre of the program and the professions of the main characters (Collins & Wellman, 1982; Wright, Huston, Leary Reitz & Piemyat, 1994). Because programs tend to follow certain genre conventions, viewers consider these conventional practices in their believability judgments. These genre-based conventions prompt viewers to have certain narrative expectations. In dramas, for instance, the main characters encounter pivotal challenges. These character challenges usually have predictable endings that intentionally try to satisfy viewers' positive outcome expectations (Lerner, 1980). Meanwhile, situation comedies have more time limitations and different narrative structures. In situation comedies, the main characters typically have certain personality quirks (e.g. obsessive compulsive behaviors, an argumentative temperament, a

victimization posture) and personal challenges (e.g. needing to find a lasting love relationship, needing to manage difficult relationships) that are ongoing throughout the run of the series.

In comparison to police dramas, situation comedies, soap operas and science fiction programs may not be held to the same realism standards. Though arguably, even in these genres, there are realistic elements for viewers to experience some degree of identification with characters. Program developers and writers for the *Star Trek* series included some innately human traits when they formulated characters such as Spock, Warf and the borg queen. Consequently, viewers sometimes evaluate such fantastical characters as realistic if a character demonstrates “emotional realism,” even though they evaluate the premise and other elements of a program as improbable or implausible (Hall, 2003, p. 635).

In addition to assessing the believability of characters’ emotions, viewers evaluate characters’ appearances, behaviors, ethics and speech characteristics (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Hoorn & Konijn, 2003). Viewers also consider characters’ similarity to social categories (e.g. ethnicity, gender, and class), settings, and the contexts of narratives (Hoorn & Konijn, 2003). Using this information, viewers determine the believability of specific aspects of characterizations, as well as form believability judgments about the program overall, the genre and television in general.

The believability assessment process can seemingly happen very quickly as individuals can very quickly assess a person’s or a character’s observable attributes, behaviors, and contexts. Comparable to real-life situations, viewers form impressions of others through observations. With television characters, viewers have even more

information than they have concerning real-life persons. Viewers are able to have an insight into the private lives of characters and observe them in private situations, where they could not necessarily view real-life persons (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991).

Identification with Characters

Identification with media characters involves going beyond acting as just a spectator in the reception process, to “a state in which one adopts the goals and identity of a character” (Cohen, 2001, p. 250). This requires cognitive involvement on the part of the viewer. Factors that might influence involvement are for instance, attention, character liability, and familiarity with a program and its characters. These factors can also affect viewers’ recall of characters (Elliot & Slater, 1980; Busselle, 2001).

If characters are believable, viewers can temporarily respond to fictional characters and events within narratives as if they are real. Consequently, viewers can experience physiological responses to television content. For instance, a viewer might experience anxiety when watching a fictional character involved in a car chase or sadness when a character is wounded or dies (Cohen, 2001; Shapiro & Lang, 1991). In these parasocial interactions, viewers react to media characters as they would respond to real life persons and situations (Klimmt, Hartman & Schramm, 2006; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

On the other hand, a lack of believability can often lead to more cognitive distance rather than identification. Viewers impressions that characters bear some similarities to real life persons is said to prompt more comparisons than dissimilarity impressions. Consequently, similarity assessments increase viewers’ involvement in

media texts (Hoorn & Konijn, 2003). Meanwhile, feelings of dissimilarity can interfere with viewers' willingness to adopt the perspective of the character.

Viewers are more likely to adopt the perspectives of leading characters (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). In fact, the success of television programs largely depends on the likeability of main characters. Unless secondary characters are the subject of a narrative they may not receive much attention from viewers (Maccoby, Wilson & Burton, 1958). Consequently, viewers are also less likely to adopt the perspective of these characters.

Viewers' familiarity with leading characters allows for more empathetic responses, even when they are observed behaving badly (Hall, 2006; Jose & Brewer, 1984; Raney, 2005; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Schmitt & Maes, 2006). For instance, regular viewers of the night time drama *Desperate Housewives* might feel empathetic toward the Latina character Gabrielle "Gaby" Solis when she engages in an extra marital affair. Yet viewers might wish that a secondary character who engages in the same behavior is punished for their actions. For secondary characters, television narratives typically apply what Lerner (1980) refers to as "a belief in a just world" (p. 11). Following this notion, secondary characters "get what they deserve," however, what one deserves depends on one's entitlement (Lerner, 1980, p. 11). Even in a just world, cultural hierarchies dictate that there are "a range of negative outcomes" for deviance that depend on for instance, one's social position, remorse for their actions, and likeability (Lerner, 1980, p. 11; Schmitt & Maes, 2006). Presumably, leading characters who display socially deviant behaviors are inherently good people who merely struggle to overcome personal challenges (Jose & Brewer, 1984; Lerner, 1980). Consequently, viewers are primed to forgive them, and even to enjoy watching them battle the same challenges

episode after episode. Alternatively, their antagonists' punishment is a necessary form of justice that reaffirms that good overcomes evil (Lerner, 1980; Raney, 2005; Schmitt & Maes, 2006). Schmitt and Maes (2006) termed this common narrative resolution the "the justice-finality principle" (p. 277). These narrative conventions leave little room for viewers to positively evaluate Latino secondary characters when they are the antagonists. Instead, research suggests viewers even enjoy seeing antagonists punished for their actions (Raney, 2005).

Guarded Receptions

Another factor that influences involvement is the importance of the social identity portrayed. Viewers are more likely to accept the social judgments presented on television when they are less involved with the judgments. Therefore, greater involvement can result in more critical interpretations of characterizations (Busselle, 2001; Graves, 1976; Warren, Orbe & Greer-Williams, 2003).

Graves (1976) conducted interviews with children, adolescents and adults to investigate whether there are particular aspects of television content viewers attend to when making realism judgments, and whether there are differences according to age. Graves included Puerto Rican, African American and Anglo informants in her study. Graves reportedly found no difference "in the use of content cues," when comparing the responses of persons with different ethnic backgrounds (p. 5). However, Graves (1976) presented some evidence of differing interpretations of content when the viewer shared the identity of the ethnic group portrayed. The author provided an example of one African American viewer, who demonstrated a more critical interpretation of an African American character than an Anglo viewer. Conversely, the Anglo viewer found the

depiction believable, while the African American viewer compared the characterization to stereotypes. Graves (1976) indicated the need for future studies to further investigate less abstract differentiations in viewers' perceived realism judgments, e.g. incidents within narratives rather than merely narratives in general.

In a more recent study, Warren, Orbe and Greer-Williams (2003) found that Latino participants interpreted a conflict between an African American male and Anglo female character in a reality series through their "keen sense of awareness of the role that racial stereotypes play in interracial interactions" (p. 18). They found distinctive differences in the ways participants in Latino, African American, and Anglo focus groups interpreted what inspired the characters' conflict. Although Anglo viewers doubted whether cultural differences or race contributed to the characters' conflict, African American and Latino viewers articulated that such differences were important to understanding the interaction between the two characters (Warren, Orbe & Greer-Williams, 2003).

Undoubtedly, Latino viewers' socialization as an "ethnic minority" influences Latino viewers' receptions of television characters. The "minority" identity I am referring to is a "social identification," not necessarily statistically representative of a smaller population in all contexts. Instead, minority is a social identification that communicates membership in a particular social category (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). According to this theoretical conceptualization, social categories such as *minority* or *Latino*, "are inextricably linked in the sense that one's conception or definition of who one is (one's identity) is largely composed of self-descriptions in terms of defining characteristics of social groups to which one belongs" (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 7). Even if someone

rejects their social identities, they are aware that other persons make assumptions about their social identities.

The lack of Latino representations and the prevalence of negative representations on television and in films inform Latino viewers' perceptions about their relative importance in public institutions and media (Rios, 2000). Rios (2000) asserts that even positive portrayals can evoke a certain amount of "guarded" reception "because of decades of exclusion from media" (p. 171). This dynamic can inspire various forms of conformity and resistance, evident in other reception studies (Rivadeneyra, 2006; Warren, Orbe & Greer-Williams, 2003). For these reasons, it was important to consider whether matters of identity influence viewers' cultural believability appraisals. Furthermore, there was a need for further exploration concerning whether there are particular cultural aspects of television content that elicit perceived realism or believability responses (Graves, 1976; Greenberg & Reeves, 1976). When one considers the social significance of television portrayals, the cultural believability of ethnic/racial minority characters is equally if not more important than the believability of other elements of media texts.

Overview of the Dissertation

In this chapter, I explained the theoretical understandings that prompted this field study. In particular, I emphasized why I employed the concept cultural believability and its relevance to matters of reception, perceived realism and identification. This field study was exploratory because there was a limited body of research investigating second and later generation Latino viewers' receptions of Latino fictional character in English language television programs.

In Chapter 2 Naturalistic Approach to Reception Analysis, the methods I employed to conduct this field study are explained. Additionally, I discuss why Los Angeles was selected as the field study site, the characteristics of the 35 Latino informants for this reception analysis, as well as procedural, analytical and methodological considerations.

Chapter 3 Behind the Scenes, the first of three field study report chapters, focuses on my informants' assumptions about casting, production, and actors' performances. Although previous audience studies apparently do not present detailed accounts of the ways these assumptions inform viewers' receptions, these topics were major themes that emerged during my discussions with viewers.

In Chapter 4 On the Screen, I discuss their receptions of Latino fictional characterizations. Their perceptions of characterizations were connected to larger issues of ethnic identity experiences outside the world of television. Without any prompting viewers compared portrayals to real world experiences. Their recall of specific character and narrative details further expressed the ways they attended to the cultural believability of Latino portrayals. Specifically, they conveyed the need to introduce characters and narratives that counter common stereotypes to encourage identification.

Chapter 5 Character Development is the last of the fieldwork report chapters. In this chapter, I present viewers' recommendations for conveying Latino identities in fictional characterizations. In the discussion, I explain their perceptions of their cultural identities as further evidence of the relevance of their observations. Viewers' recommendations in addition to my observations highlight the importance of cultural believability concerning specific aspects of characterizations.

Finally, Chapter 6 Discussion and Conclusions briefly summarizes the understandings gleaned from this field study and their implications for character and program development decisions. In particular, I summarize the reasons why employing the concept cultural believability offers several advantages for researchers investigating matters of representations, viewers' receptions and perceived realism appraisals. The dissertation ends with a discussion of directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: NATURALISTIC APPROACH TO RECEPTION ANALYSIS

As I indicated in Chapter 1, there is a lack of qualitative reception studies exploring second and later generation Latino viewers' perceptions of Latino television portrayals in English language programs. In this chapter, I explain the qualitative methods used to conduct this dissertation research and the methodological understandings that informed these methods. Additionally, I attempt to explain how these understandings and decisions might have influenced the information viewers provided, as well as my interpretations of their insights.

This chapter begins with an introduction of the naturalistic methods of inquiry I employed to conduct this field study. I follow this discussion with a description of the setting of this research in the section land of television studios and disputed borders. Next, I discuss matters of gaining familiarity in the research scene and identifying potential informants, followed by a description of the Latino viewers who were informants for this field study. In later sections of the chapter, I explain I how I approached guided conversations and the analysis process.

Naturalistic Methods of Inquiry

Naturalistic research or qualitative field studies involve “direct qualitative observation of natural situations or settings using, mainly, the techniques of participant observation or intensive interviewing, or both” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 1).

Naturalistic approaches are well suited for audience reception studies because they provide rich descriptive information researchers might not identify using quantitative or other qualitative research approaches (Gibson, 2000; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Morley, 1980; Morley & Silverstone, 1991). Morley (1980) is most often credited with advancing

the field of audience reception studies by stressing in his book *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding* the need to more deeply investigate audiences' engagement with texts in the usual settings where reception occurs (Gibson, 2000; Hagen & Wasko, 2000; Jensen, 1991; Seiter, 1992). Prior to the 1980s, audience studies were often positivist in their orientation, and typically either focused on media texts or audiences rather than both the text and audience (Hagen & Wasko, 2000; Jensen, 1991).

Theoretically, reception studies consider “the complex ways in which television viewing is inextricably embedded in a whole range of everyday practices, and is itself partly constitutive of those practices” (Morley & Silverstone, 1991, p. 149). Because viewers interact with and discuss media content as a part of their everyday social practices (Geiger, Bruning & Harwood, 2001), reception studies are enriched through guided conversations and participant observations in the informal settings where reception takes place or is discussed (Eldridge, Kitzinger, & Williams, 1997; Gibson, 2000; Jensen, 1991; Moores, 1993; Morley, 1980; Morley & Silverstone, 1991; Seiter, 1992). With these considerations in mind, I employed a combination of naturalistic approaches that involved guided conversations and participant observations. As the researcher, I strived to function as “a witness to lives of others . . . in a naturally occurring situation or setting” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 3). In these settings, I attempted to understand, “describe-and inevitably interpret” viewers' perceptions of the cultural believability of Latino fictional characters (Morley & Silverstone, 1991, p. 153). As a participant observer, I was not merely a witness because I played an instrumental role in the research scene (Kvale, 1996; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Morely & Silverstone, 1991).

In the following pages, I attempt to explain the advantages and challenges I faced using naturalistic methods of inquiry. As Bird (2003) rightly noted, “All methodological approaches are characterized by constraints; the key is to be flexible, tailor one’s ‘encounter’ to a particular situation, and be aware of the possible impact of the methodological choices” (p.15). With this in mind, I describe the decisions I made, the potential impact they might have had on my research and foreseen and unforeseen challenges I encountered during the field study.

Land of Television Studios and Disputed Borders

When I was deciding where to conduct my fieldwork during the months of June, July and August in 2005, Los Angeles, California was a logical choice. Just as it is important to explain why I selected Los Angeles as the fieldwork location, it is worth mentioning certain dynamics within this environment that might have informed viewers’ perceptions. For generations, persons of Mexican heritage and other Latin American ancestries have resided in Los Angeles. Estimates suggest 45% of the city’s population is Latino, the majority of whom are second and later generation persons (Catanzarite, 2003). More importantly, Los Angeles is the main location for the U.S. television industry. Consequently, the thirty-five viewers I interviewed had some familiarity with the television industry. By virtue of where they live, viewers living in the Los Angeles area have more opportunities than the average viewer to attend program taping sessions. Likewise, fictional settings and Latino-themed programs are often based on communities in Los Angeles. In their neighborhoods or just driving in the city, it is not uncommon for people to encounter television or film crews recording scenes on-location outside of one of the major studios. Some viewers even see television personalities or actors when going

about their daily lives. This proximity to the television industry and viewers' awareness that television productions often attempt to depict their communities privileges their perceptions of these representations. For these reasons, Latino viewers living in Los Angeles provide an important interpretation of the cultural believability of Latino characterizations.

Beyond the notable presence of the television industry, there are other aspects of Los Angeles that influence the city's ethnic/racial climate. It is not uncommon to hear Angelenos discuss the cultural geography of the city in terms of an East/West divide. In the early twentieth century, Mexican residents and an influx of Mexican immigrants were pushed to areas east of the Los Angeles River due to the decentralized industrialization of the city, and the consequential rapid suburbanization of areas surrounding the city center. Discriminatory housing and investment practices, employment, and the development of an inter-urban transportation system encouraged the barrioization of the East side of the city (Menchaca, 1995; Romo, 1983; Villa, 2000). While Anglos were increasingly settling in the western outskirts of the city, and relying less on the public transportation system due to a high rate of car ownership, the city's Mexican American population concentrated on the East side (Menchaca, 1995).

By the mid-twentieth century, Mexican American residents attempted to desegregate East Los Angeles, in hopes of encouraging more economic investments and opportunities for Mexican Americans in and outside of East L.A. (Menchaca, 1995). Although similar attempts at desegregation occurred throughout the U.S., the city's history as a part of Mexican territory prior to the end of the Mexican-American War in 1850 prompted additional resistance from city officials (Villa, 2000). Issues of Mexican

and American nationalities and the ethnic/racial tensions that accompanied these designations were still evident in the city's governance in the 1940s and 1950s (Menchaca, 1995).

In 2005, East Los Angeles was a vast and diversely populated geographic area. However, there was still a higher concentration of Mexican descendents residing in East Los Angeles than in West Los Angeles (Menchaca, 1995; Romo, 1983). Due to its history, Los Angeles is a city where people with diverse backgrounds vie for employment, and other resources, as well as communal cultural spaces. When driving through the city, one can notice the blending and co-existing of Mexican, Anglo and other cultures in the architecture of buildings, the diversity of businesses and other services catering to Mexican clientele. Yet, in other instances, it seems as if these cultures collide, as disputed *las fronteras* [border lands], sometimes symbolically, sometimes literally.

July 1, 2005, I watched Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's televised inaugural address. There was a great deal of excitement surrounding his inauguration, as the first Latino Mayor elected in over 100 years. In his address, Mayor Villaraigosa, an Angeleno who grew up in East L.A., highlighted a number of city-wide problems, namely high school dropout rates, unemployment and homelessness. Promising change, he said "L.A. can be a great global city . . . Dream with me, where it doesn't matter if you are Black, Latino." Symbolic of this "global city" a Mexican American man waved a Mexican flag during his address and members of the audience also chanted "*Sí se puede!*" [Yes, we can!], a chant made famous by César Chávez in the 1970s during the United Farmer Workers' Movement. After the address, the news reported that a veteran angered by the showing of

a Mexican flag confronted the flag bearer, reflecting how the array of cultures and nationalities also at times collide in this city with a history of disputed Mexican/U.S. borders.

Gaining Familiarity in the Research Scene

After selecting a fieldwork location, gaining familiarity in the research scene is one of the first challenges non-native researchers face when doing this sort of qualitative research (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). After considering different locations, I decided to live in El Sereno, in East Los Angeles, not far from where I had arranged to work as a non-paid part-time intern in the marketing department of a new English-language Latino cable network that targets second and later generation viewers. I was attracted to the network's mission to present non-stereotypical portrayals. I wanted to observe the network's approach to representations. In this regard, I assumed the internship experience would enhance my fieldwork.

During the internship, I worked on a variety of mainly research-related small projects⁵. Although I offered to do empirical audience research, the research I did for the network was limited to literature searches and gathering information to write text copy for the network's web site. For the latter, I interviewed former contestants of a reality program that was in post-production. Although production schedules are generally lighter in the summer, I was able to observe a few program tapings.

In addition to the internship, in July and August, I volunteered to chaperone Friday fieldtrips for the bilingual charter school where my roommate and a mutual friend,

⁵ I was required to sign a confidentiality agreement, a common industry practice; therefore, I only included observations related to my involvement with the network, not the daily operations of the network in the writing of this dissertation.

Jackie, worked. Jackie and several other school staff members planned experiential learning opportunities outside of the classroom. I accompanied Jackie and her students when they went to the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and when the group traveled to the National (César) Chávez Center in Keene, California, where Chávez is buried and members of his family still reside. With the students, I also had the opportunity to further explore identity issues related to immigration, citizenship, discrimination, activism, language and education. Because the fieldtrips were experiential learning opportunities, participants sometimes shared their reactions to what we learned and personal accounts of related experiences.

Throughout the fieldwork, I took notes of daily observations and interactions with television viewers prior to conducting guided conversations. In particular, I noted events, things people said and other observations that informed my understanding of the research scene and my informants' experiences. During and after the fieldwork, I referred to these notes when analyzing the insights I gleaned as a participant observer.

Identifying Potential Informants

When I started the fieldwork, I did not have a firm date to begin conducting guided conversations with viewers. However, after three weeks, I felt ready to begin. I was comfortable enough with my surroundings. And I had identified several key informants who were willing to advise me on my fieldwork decisions.

By snowball sampling, asking informants to refer me to other potential informants, I was able to interact with people I might not have otherwise encountered. Connecting with informants through a referral can make it easier for researchers to develop a rapport with interviewees. Because snowball sampling relies on interpersonal

connections, this method of identifying potential informants works well with naturalistic methods, such as participant observation (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

Initially, informants tended to select people they believed could easily articulate their opinions. Moreover, they tended to consider their opinions when referring other informants (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). I attempted to overcome this challenge by snowball sampling through eight different people, some of whom did not know one another, and by identifying potential informants through another method, participant observation. By also approaching persons not identified through the snowball technique, I was curious as to whether the informants I identified through participant observations would offer different insights.

I often met with the viewers who informed the findings of this dissertation at a popular national coffee chain. In other instances, I met with my informants in their homes and other social settings, i.e. their workplaces, bars, restaurants, stores, at outdoor festivals and parties. In these locations, I approached other potential informants and asked if they would be willing to talk about Latino television characters. And when I had the opportunity, I watched television and viewed films with the viewers I met.

Latino Viewers

Most of the people I interviewed lived in East Los Angeles. A few informants lived in South Central L.A.; and retired couple I interviewed lived just outside of the city limits. I was introduced to them after meeting their daughter at a social gathering in East L.A. This was the case for the other viewers who lived in South Central L.A. In each case, I first met someone they knew in East L.A., and then I was introduced to them when they were working or at some social gathering in East L.A.

When trying to identify potential informants, I focused primarily on recruiting Mexican American viewers, although not exclusively. As I previously stated, there are more second and later generation Mexican Americans than other Latino heritage nationalities in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Moreover, many of the cultural representations discussed in previous studies identify television characterizations of Mexican and Central American nationalities (Children Now, 1999; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 1999; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 2000; Rivadeneyra, 2006). For these reasons, I assumed Mexican American and Central American viewers would have important interpretations of Latino characterizations. Of the thirty-five viewers I spoke with, only two informants indicated that they were not Mexican American, but instead were Salvadorian American. In addition to these individuals, one informant said his father was from Mexico and his mother was from El Salvador. In Los Angeles, people of Mexican and Central American nationalities tend to live in close proximity to larger Mexican American populations (Hamilton & Stoltz Chinchilla, 2001).

It is important to mention that the remaining informants did not indicate the nationalities of their parents or grandparents. When I approached potential informants in various social settings, it did not always seem appropriate to ask their Latino ancestry. Naturally, there were more time constraints when I identified informants through participant observations. When I approached, for instance, grocery sales clerks on their breaks, I tried to immediately focus the conversations on representations, rather than spending time becoming more acquainted with their background, except for asking whether they could speak from a second or later generation Latino perspective.

The majority of my informants were second generation bilingual persons, fairly fluent in Spanish. Two persons were generation 1.5⁶. Most of the second and 1.5 generation persons I interviewed grew up in homes where Spanish was the primary language their parents used to communicate. A number of informants were third generation and not as fluent in Spanish as the second and 1.5 generation persons I interviewed. Third generation persons tend to have less exposure to Spanish because it is not their parents' native language (Phinney & Flores, 2002; Portes & Schauffler, 1996).

With regard to other demographic information such as gender, twenty of the informants were male, and fifteen were females. The majority of the informants were between 18 and 35 years of age. Seven people were likely over the age of 35, but not seniors. Two informants were retired and over the age of 60. My informants were mainly working class persons, (i.e. sales clerks, security guards, administrative assistants, a school bus driver, a nursing assistant), although some were middle class professionals (e.g. teachers, a pharmaceutical sales representative). Twelve people completed high school and had not attended college. Ten informants had a bachelor's degree; and one viewer possibly had a master's degree because she was a school teacher. Five viewers were college students at the time; out of the five, one male informant was a non-traditional college student, who returned to school after working and starting a family.

I did not always ask informants demographic questions. Asking demographic questions can seem inappropriate even in guided conversations. For instance, if someone considers why a researcher asked a question about their education, this might influence

⁶ They were born outside of the U.S. However, they immigrated to the U.S. as children or adolescents. Therefore, they experienced socialization in the U.S. in their formative years.

their comments and responses to other questions. Snowball sampling and participant observation methods can provide opportunities to learn this information. When conducting naturalistic inquiries, it is preferable to learn this information when someone refers to it in the course of the conversation. At other times, it might be best to learn this information through observations or from another informant in the course of a conversation (see Appendix A: List of Informants).

Because of the high cost of living in the L.A. area, most of the people I interviewed lived with family members or roommates. For this reason, they often watched television with other members of their households. Throughout the fieldwork, I spent time with several families. As a result, in some instances, I had guided conversations with more than one family member. However, the fact they were family members did not mean they shared the same perceptions. Typically, the family members I spoke with had some differing opinions. At the same time, spending time with members of the same family allowed for more familiarity as a researcher.

Guided Conversations

Guided conversations generally lasted between a half an hour and three hours. I spent more time with some informants than others; and during some conversations, my informants and I engaged in other activities. Most of the conversations were tape-recorded with a micro-cassette recorder and then transcribed. For some impromptu conversations, I took notes during or after I had conversations with my informants. In planned instances, I taped recorded conversations. Initially, I assumed a notebook would be less obtrusive than a tape recorder. Then, when it seemed difficult to capture some of the details of often lengthy conversations, I opted to audio record conversations. This

required always carrying a tape recorder, as I was not always sure when an opportunity to speak with a potential informant would arise. Introducing the tape recorder did not seem to notably influence the conversations; and it provided the flexibility to document more of what was said. Because these conversations were informal and initiated by my involvement in the research scene as a participant observer rather than formal structured-interviews I do not reference particular dates in the field study report chapters of this dissertation.

I conducted the interviews or guided conversations in English. Occasionally, my informants and I spoke in Spanish. As the interviewer, I rarely spoke in Spanish; and when I did speak in Spanish, it was only to make reference to the way Spanish words and phrases are used or might be used in English-language programs⁷. Many of my informants however, spoke in Spanish when a word or phrase did not have the same inflection in English or when they were repeating something that was said in Spanish.

The challenge as an interviewer, as Kvale (1996) rightly notes, is “to create in a short time a contact that allows the interaction to get beyond merely a polite conversation or exchange of ideas” (p.125). To do this, I needed to gain the trust of my informants. This required demonstrating a sincere interest in accurately representing their opinions; and at times, patience when developing familiarity before asking questions pertaining to my research (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Ryen, 2001).

⁷ I have a limited Spanish proficiency and I often experience speech apprehension when I consider speaking in Spanish.

Reflecting back on my fieldwork, I can recount a number of moments when I realized the richness of what I was learning because I was given entrée into people's private lives and spaces (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). In private spaces, people tend to be less guarded and more open to sharing their opinions. For instance, I spoke with one female viewer about television characterizations while she was lying on her mother's bed and her nephews were running in and out of the room playing. She was tired after a long day of work and the house was full of energy. Looking for a somewhat quieter place than the one common living area where her family was gathered after their weekly dinner ritual, she suggested that we speak in her mother's bedroom. It might seem unusual for a person to invite someone to interview them in a bedroom, the most private of spaces. However, when doing naturalistic research, a researcher's familiarity can give them access to people's private spaces. Even though I made every effort to develop a rapport with my informants as a known researcher, there were still many moments when I was surprised that my intentions and interests in gaining this sort of access or familiarity was rarely questioned.

I was also surprised that many informants did not seem to mention to their referrals that I was not Latino. I would usually learn this towards the end of conversations, when people tended to ask me questions about my ethnic background after referring to the heterogeneity of Latino communities (e.g. the differences between Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans). This was when I usually told them about my ethnic/racial heritage, as a person of African American and Anglo ancestry. When their facial expressions suggested they were surprised and puzzled, I would tell them that to a certain extent I experience life as a Latina person because people tend to assume that it is

my identity. They usually seemed to accept my response, probably because they too believed I was Latina—so it seemed only logical that other persons might assume the same and interact with me as if I were Latina. After meeting my roommate Ileana for the first time, I remember overhearing a phone conversation she had with Jackie, someone who later became a key informant and friend. In the conversation, I remember her telling Jackie, “You are not going to believe it when you see her. She really looks Latina [laughs].”

Participant Researcher

How to manage my identity, my role as a researcher, and how to negotiate both the distance and closeness one needs to do this sort of research was challenging (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the fieldwork stemmed from my role as a participant observer. In the process of doing research, I developed friendships with a number of my informants. After ending my field study, I have maintained some of these friendships. Researchers who do naturalistic fieldwork sometimes develop “close personal ties with the researched” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 63). When one is immersed in the scene of their fieldwork developing empathy and alliances with one’s informants seems unavoidable (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Ryen, 2001).

Naturalistic research can require more of a time investment in the informants’ lives than other investigative approaches (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). In instances, when people give researchers access to their homes and family life, it is difficult to explain how one comes to know what they learn. At least, it is difficult to do without feeling some reservations about disclosing personal information, even when people offer this

information and the topic is not particularly controversial (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Because I participated in the research scene for an extended period of time I sometimes focused more on the happenings of daily life than on my research priorities. Likewise, after meeting me to discuss television portrayals, people probably did not invite me to come back to their homes, to attend family gatherings and other events because of my research. Naturally, living in a research setting, one's daily life tends to intersect with one's research. Fortunately, in naturalistic inquires this can provide a more in-depth understanding of one's informants' opinions and the research scene.

Of course, participant observation fieldwork experiences are not entirely similar to life outside of research. In naturalistic investigations, researchers have to be selective about what they tell people. Every disclosure can impact the research (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). In my case, interning for the television network influenced some of my informant's perceptions of the purpose of my research. When making arrangements to meet informants, I would sometimes mention my internship schedule; and during interviews, I sometimes referred to the network when answering and asking questions. Consequently, people tended to assume my affiliation with the network had more to do with my research than my academic studies. Had I considered this, in instances when it was not unethical, I might not have disclosed that I was interning with a television network to maintain more distance from the industry. I managed this predicament by further explaining that I was acting independently as a student researcher and by questioning informants about what feedback they wished to offer to industry professionals.

Naturalistic approaches that use “guided conversations” attempt to mimic the ways conversations occur and evolve (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 85). This is particularly challenging because the very nature of having a conversation suggests two-way communication should occur. If an interviewer is able to mimic the ways conversations happen and evolve, as the interviewer, one cannot avoid taking part in the conversation to some extent. This is a real challenge. How much should an interviewer reveal about their ideas and assumptions? Moreover, when should a researcher reveal their ideas? I had to confront these decisions early in the interview process.

Typically, I began conversations by stating that I was doing a research project as a part of my studies at Ohio University. I would explain that I was interested in knowing more about their opinions of Latino characters in English language television programs. Kvale (1996) suggests researchers maintain a “deliberate naiveté” or “openness to new and unexpected phenomena” (p. 33). Thus, I tried to assume the position of someone who wanted to learn, rather than someone with a particular expertise, given that such a stance can inhibit people from sharing their opinions. However, as Kvale (1996) indicates, “the research interview is not a conversation between equal partners, the interview is introduced by the researcher, who also critically follows up on the subject’s answers to his or her questions” (p. 6). This is a reality that neither the interviewer nor the informant can completely overlook. As the interviewer, I attempted to focus the attention of the conversation on understanding their perceptions (Kvale, 1996).

Except for key informants and the industry professionals I contacted, I did not explain to most informants that I was a doctoral student working on a dissertation project. Instead, I explained that I was “a university student from Ohio, doing a research project

in order to complete my degree.” In my experience, beyond assuming that someone is establishing themselves as an expert in a field, people are generally unclear as to what is involved in the process or the sort of employment options someone might have with a Ph.D. For these reasons, I made a conscious effort to not seem like “an expert,” mainly because I wanted to learn about their interpretations of characterizations. It is useful for researchers to assume a certain naiveté to position oneself as someone wishing to learn rather than impose one’s own perceptions (Kvale, 1996). Concurrently, my internship experience made me more sensitive to the assumption that academics are overly critical or analytical, and that academics’ perceptions are vastly different from the average viewer. In the end, I think my sensitivity to this perception was an advantage during the field study. As a result, I had a tendency to probe further when informants seemed to have critical receptions of characterizations.

Prior to conducting the guided conversations, I anticipated that my gender might influence my interactions with viewers. Methodologists suggest males might be more apprehensive to speaking with female interviewers (Marín & Marín, 1991; Ryen, 2001). Likewise, interviewees sometimes object to their spouses or romantic partners engaging in personal conversations with interviewers (Marín & Marín, 1991). However, my gender did not seem to negatively influence my interactions with informants. Instead, I would say that my gender gave me greater access to potential informants. As a female interviewer, I seemed less threatening when I approached people in public spaces. Moreover, during conversations with male viewers I did not get the sense that my gender discouraged them from disclosing their perceptions. Some of the most forthright viewers I interviewed were males. When I spoke with males in the presence of their partners

rather than alone, I did not notice any differences in males' willingness to disclose their opinions. This was not entirely surprising because it is common for people to discuss the believability of television programs with persons in their interpersonal networks (Albada, 2000; Hall, 2003).

Beginning Interviews and Matters of Flexibility

Within perceived realism empirical studies, viewers are either asked about their online judgments, judgments they make while viewing programs or memory-based realism judgments (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000). Online judgments are typically asked during experimental studies when television content is altered in some way. Asking online questions while viewing television in the normal viewing context could have potentially interrupted the viewing experience and influenced people's receptions; therefore, I asked informants about their memory-based realism judgments. Clearly, viewers are able to remember and recall specifics details about characters and narratives after a long period of time (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991), particularly characters and narratives that evoke stronger responses whether positive or negative. However, previous research suggests viewers are less likely to recall characters that evoke more neutral emotions (Shapiro & Lang, 1991). Therefore, it is fair to assume that the representations viewers discuss have particular relevance in terms of their perceptions of Latino fictional characterizations.

Interviewers often need to adapt their interview techniques depending on the interview situation or direction of the conversation. Although, interviewers typically have topics of interest in mind in guided conversations, they do not adhere to an interview guide as they would when conducting structured interviews. This flexibility allows more

room for interviewees and interviewers to redirect questions when they deem it necessary (Kvale, 1996; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Ryen, 2001).

Intentionally, I first referred to Latino characterizations more generally, then asked questions about specific examples depending on their responses or specific characters viewers mentioned. Because there are so few Latino representations on English language television and given the number of television outlets, it seemed too limiting to assume viewers might be familiar with particular programs or characters. At the same, I also did not want to limit discussions with viewers to one program's characters given the collective nature of ethnic representations. In other words, viewers clearly considered specific characterizations within the context of the ways Latinos have historically been portrayed in television and in film productions, as reception theory suggests (Bobo, 2003; Eldridge, Kitinger & Williams, 1997; Gibson, 2000; Gillespie, 2003; Jensen, 1991 Saenz, 1992).

By first asking them, for instance, "What do you think about the Latino characters you see in English language programs?" I wanted to encourage viewers to initiate topics related to this broader question. Then, I followed these questions with more specific questions about characters' cultural believability. Often though, viewers answered my initial questions by commenting about Latino characters' realism or similarity to real life persons. Through this approach it became clear that this was a topic they were already considering and discussing, as previous research suggested (Albada, 2000; Dorr, 1983; Hall, 2003; Hawkins, 1977; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Hoorn & Konijn, 2003; Potter, 1986; Weintraub Austin, Roberts & Nass, 1990). My follow-up questions focused on specific programs, characters, elements of characters or programs and themes that

emerged in the conversations. At times, I also asked viewers “to pitch me a show idea.” I would tell them to describe a show or scene involving their family members, friends or someone they knew, with experiences they could relate to as a viewer. Some viewers were surprisingly creative in their answers. They seemed to enjoy thinking about what they would do if they had to come up with a characterization or a premise for a program or episode based on their experiences or cultural knowledge.

Even though I began the conversations by prompting my informants to discuss Latino representations in a more general sense, rather than any one particular heritage-nationality, as the conversations progressed my informants made some distinctions based on their ancestry and experiences. They were also keenly aware of the television industry’s attempt to construct the Latino audience as more homogenous than heterogeneous (Dávila, 2000a; Rodríguez, A., 1997). Consequently, the viewers I spoke with recognized a shared constructed Latino identity between characters with different Latino nationalities or heritage nationalities. They did, however, refer more to specific details when discussing characters that shared their Latino heritage.

Challenges of Guided Conversations

In general, the viewers I met were more than willing to talk about their opinions of television portrayals. Some viewers even stated that they enjoyed talking about it. Television programs are a topic that people tend to talk about in their leisure and in social and work settings where they interact with others. Quite naturally, viewers might say, “Did you see X program last night? What did you think of the Latino character that was in that program?” Persons might even talk about television programs as a way to develop a rapport with someone else. This, of course, is an advantage to doing this sort of

audience research. At the same time, there are some challenges I faced due to the naturalistic methods I employed.

Like unplanned conversations, during the course of the interviews, the topics of the conversation tended to jump around. As a result, I did not always have the opportunity to follow up on some comments or responses to my questions. I also have a tendency to nod my head when I conduct interviews to encourage people to continue sharing their perceptions and to signify that I am listening. This need to act as an attentive listener was something I was aware of when I talked to viewers. I knew most people were willing to talk and share more because they believed I would listen to their concerns. However, by nodding my head, I unintentionally suggested that I understood or agreed with what people said. This sometimes indicated that people did not need to explain in more detail their perceptions because I non-verbally signified that I understood their comments. As a result, they might have reconsidered explaining their perceptions and instead, moved on to other topics. When time permitted, I was able to revisit some topics (Ryen, 2001). In other instances, they would become more expressive because they believed I understood their perceptions.

Ryen's (2001) observation that "resembling an insider can dissipate the advantage of naïveté" suggests this might be something other researchers experience when conducting naturalistic research (p. 339). Though Ryen might have been referring to insider/outsider dilemmas that are related to factors other than ethnicity/race, certainly, his statement reflects what I experienced as someone who appears Latina, and therefore should have a particular socialized awareness of the cultural believability of Latino portrayals.

In the course of our conversations, viewers generally expressed a belief that only people who have some personal stake in the topic of Latino television representations would even ask the questions I was asking. There is a larger discourse concerning underrepresentation and misrepresentation in popular press (see Jones, 1999; Ruiz, 2002; Ruiz, 2005; Soriano, 2001). This coupled with the discussions Latino viewers have with other Latino viewers contributed to their sense that I would expect to hear certain responses. So, when I asked questions such as “What do you think about the Latino fictional characters you see in English language television programs?” after responding, they would end or even begin their statements with comments such as “You know what I am saying,” as if they assumed I would have intuitively known what they would say. This most likely occurred because they assumed I was Latina when I approached them in their workplaces, homes, and in other social settings.

This happened more often when I approached people as a researcher who was not referred to them by someone they knew. However, time was more of a factor in these situations. Usually people agreed to talk with me even though they had planned to do other activities. Therefore, the time I spent with them was more limited than in other instances. In these situations, I usually did not have time to give any personal information about my identity, beyond indicating my research interests and a desire to talk with them about their opinions. If they assumed I was Latina, then logically, they would have assumed I understood the opinions they expressed, given the larger discourse on the topic in popular Latino-targeted publications.

Analysis Process

For naturalistic inquires, “analysis is not an isolated stage” of inductive inquiry, rather it is ongoing throughout the entire process, from data collection to the written account of the field study (Kvale, 1996, p. 205). Because “The qualitative research interview is theme oriented . . . The resulting interview can then be analyzed primarily with respect to the life world that is described by the person, or the subject describing his or her life world” (Kvale, 1996, p. 29-30). During guided conversations, I noted observations such as informants’ body language, non-verbal communications such as facial expressions, vocal tone changes and environmental factors that might have influenced the interview conversation. In interview or observation situations, these forms of communication can provide important interpretive cues for researchers (Kvale, 1996; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Ryen, 2001).

As Kvale (1996) noted, “It is necessary to listen to the explicit descriptions and meanings as well as what is ‘said between the lines’” (Kvale, 1996, p. 31-32). The opinions people express in interview situations are sometimes implied rather than directly stated (Kvale, 1996; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Consequently, the researcher should attempt to actively understand their informants’ expressed ideas (i.e. verbal and non-verbal), during the conversation, rather than later. Inevitably, I was not always able to do this in every case because of time constraints and because of at times my own lack of clarity in the moments when the themes emerged. Sometimes, it was only after the interview conversation that I realized the significance of what was said. In these instances, whenever possible, I asked informants follow-up questions on a different

occasion and/or looked to key informants for further explanations and to discuss my interpretations.

To accurately represent what my informants verbally communicated during conversations, I took field notes and also included transcription-based analysis to further identify themes (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Kvale, 1996; Lofland & Lofland, 2005).

While I was in Los Angeles conducting the field study, I began transcribing interviews. The following fall and winter I spent several months transcribing most of the remaining interviews. Although transcribing is a tedious process, repeatedly listening to what was said during audio-recorded interviews offers many useful insights. As I transcribed the interviews, I noted the themes that emerged in the conversations. As I did this, I further reflected on my written observations from the field and existing literature. After the transcribing stage, I continually revisited the themes and literature and the written transcripts to reconsider my interpretations (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

As Coffey and Atkinson (1996) caution, as researchers, “We cannot approach the task of ‘writing up’ our research as a straightforward (if demanding) task” (p.109). As they suggest, in the writing stage of the research, researchers continue the analysis. The analytical nature of writing allowed me to continue searching for additional interpretations of the meanings I derived from my fieldwork experience. At the same time, the writing task involved reflectively pondering my concerns for the ways I *represented* viewers’ opinions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This is particular concern because:

Analysis is not simply a matter of classifying, categorizing, coding, or collecting data. It is not simply a question of identifying forms of speech or irregularities of

action. Most fundamentally, analysis is about the representation or reconstruction of social phenomena. We do not simply ‘collect’ data; we fashion them out of our transactions with other men and women. Likewise, we do not merely report what we find; we create accounts of social life and in doing so we construct versions of social worlds and the social actors we observe. It is, therefore, inescapable that analysis implies representation (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 108).

To challenge my interpretations and representations of the social accounts I report in this dissertation, I compared my interpretations to existing literature (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). When I was immersed in the task of transcribing audio-recorded conversations and when writing this work, I realized a need for additional literature concerning viewers’ interpretations of the believability of fictional characterizations. In this search, I found a more extensive body of perceived realism literature, evidenced in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. Using this and an audience reception framework, I have endeavored to articulate the understandings I gained through the field study in the following chapters.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I attempted to explain the methodological understanding that prompted the naturalistic approach to this reception analysis. Because television viewing occurs in private settings, such as the home, and television characters are frequently discussed with persons in one’s social networks, reception studies are enriched by participant observations and guided conversations in natural settings. At the same time, the decisions I made as a participant in the research scene influenced the understandings drawn from this field study experience.

As a participant in the scene, I tried to maintain an awareness of my identity as a researcher and as a non-Latino person by birth. Although, the field study experience presented some challenges, particularly, with regard to developing relationships with viewers and managing guided conversations, naturalistic methods yielded important explanations regarding some Latino viewers' interpretations of the cultural believability of Latino fictional characterizations. In the following chapters, I describe and elaborate on the dominant themes that emerged from this field study.

CHAPTER 3: BEHIND THE SCENES

As I indicated in Chapter 2, I selected Los Angeles as my fieldwork site because Los Angeles is often the setting for fictional television programs. For this reason, I assumed Los Angeles second and later generation Latino viewers would have interesting reflections concerning the believability of Latino fictional characters. Even though I anticipated viewers making comparisons between themselves and television characters, I was initially surprised by how often they discussed what they believed occurred during a program's development and production stages. This is an aspect previous audience reception studies of fictional television content have seemingly not presented.

Interestingly, viewers would go as far as inferring what industry insiders might say to other insiders when making character decisions. They related these beliefs to assumptions about production and casting decisions, providing at times, interpretations beyond what was presented in a program's final edited episodes. Specifically, they considered whether producers and writers were knowledgeable about the Latino identities they portray. They also considered what motivates industry professionals to make certain character and program decisions. This chapter focuses on the dominant themes that emerged out of these discussions.

Viewers' awareness that the television industry employs mainly Anglo professionals (Hunt, 2007; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 1999, Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 2000) informed much of their discussions about what they believed occurred behind the scenes. Viewers consistently concluded Latino fictional characters often lack believability because industry professionals tend to narrowly depict Latinos. They generally assumed Anglo television professionals lack

knowledge of Latino identities and cultures. Many viewers also said characterizations reflect what Anglo producers and writers want to portray. Some viewers suggested this happens in part because Latino viewers are not the audience industry professionals are primarily targeting.

TV Professionals Lack Knowledge

When viewers answered my questions about cultural portrayals and their believability, naturally, they considered whether the persons who produce the images are knowledgeable about Latino cultures. How did they determine this? Primarily, they seemed to determine this based on the images they had seen on television and whether or not they found them believable cultural representations. Based on their observations, most viewers concluded industry professionals generally lack knowledge of Latino cultures, particularly of the diversity that exists within Latino populations in the U.S.

Credible Details

Expressing this belief, Michael, a grocery sales clerk I met while he was working said Latino characters lack cultural believability because “They [Anglo television professionals] don’t really know about the details.” The lack of believable details was a recurrent theme throughout the interviews. In Chapter 4 and 5, I will further explain this perception in terms of their receptions of particular characterizations. However, this perception was also telling with regard to their perceptions of industry professionals’ knowledge of Latino cultures.

When suggesting television professionals “don’t really know about the details,” Michael explained:

A lot of characters are exaggerated Like the way they talk and the way they act and You know most people are not like that, you know probably 1 in 10 A lot of people have accents, but sometimes it is really exaggerated. Yeah sometimes, they try to exaggerate the accent. Yeah.

Michael and other viewers' observations of Latino characters' accents were most telling in terms of their belief that those working in the industry often present Latino characters that reflect their misperceptions. As Elizabeth also explained:

I don't mind accents if they are a part of the character. Everyone has an accent. I have an accent, but sometimes they are so exaggerated that it is not realistic. I don't like to hear accents when it is so exaggerated.

For viewers, it was important whether characters' accents were "believable."

Exaggerated accents were often perceived as "offensive." When a character has such a notably "thick accent" as Georgina put it, the actor is for instance, speaking in English with an unnatural sounding foreign accent, unnaturally rolling their r's and dragging the pronunciation of words or sounds out longer than necessary. In these instances, it is apparent that the actor is using an accent that they have not adequately studied prior to performing the role. When viewers compared character's accents to how they speak or how people they know speak, "exaggerated accents" in their opinions sound "fake." Unnatural sounding accents were referred to as "embarrassing" and "annoying," since presumably actors are replicating how people speak in real life situations.

Viewer after viewer mentioned that they were bothered when accents do not match the character's identity. This was considered an oversight on the part of the casting

professionals, production staffs and actors. For instance, when Belinda referred to a character in a film, she said, “he is supposed to be Mexican. Yet when he is speaking the Cuban accent comes out . . . I mean if they are going to play a Mexican go ahead but, or, if a Cuban is going to play a Mexican, do the correct accent.” Their comments suggested viewers pay close attention to the accuracy of accents, even if casting directors, actors and the creative teams behind productions are not sensitive to differences in accents.

People tended to find it particularly unrealistic when television programs depict Latino families and the characters accents suggest that they have different Latino ancestries. Referring to *Resurrection Blvd.*, an original Showtime television series that was at the time in second-run syndication, Miguel discussed why it was “irritating to hear” cast members who are supposed be part of the same nuclear Puerto Rican family speaking with different accents. “It doesn’t make sense” to have a first and second generation persons in the same Puerto Rican family speaking Cuban and Mexican Spanish accented English.

From viewers’ perspectives, whether industry professionals pay attention to these sorts of cultural details, contributes to viewers’ judgments about industry professionals’ credibility. Expressing this opinion, Armando said:

It’s like “you know what, do some research man cause,” and you know what even within L.A., I was telling some L.A. natives about the intonation between the way that Latinos in East L.A. speak English compared to the way that Latinos in Frogtown speak English and compared to the Latinos in another place. And like it is slight, but it’s there and there is a difference . . . and if you can get it right it makes it so much more credible.

Armando's comment about credibility also expressed his general distrust for industry professionals, who he believed, as other viewers did, often overlook details they perceived as reflective of their ethnic identities. His comment further communicates the ways viewers related character believability to the credibility of portrayals, noticing aspects of characterizations industry professionals might overlook, such as differences in regional accents.

During our conversation, Armando shared stories of his family history and experiences living mainly in two different cities, L.A. and El Paso. As he explained it, after he was born in L.A., his family relocated to El Paso, where he grew up. Because he did not grow up in L.A., he enjoyed seeing characters and hearing accents that reminded him of El Paso. Although, it is rare that he actually hears El Paso accents, when he did, he remembered it. Armando fondly recalled a minor scene in *Selena*, a 1997 film, depicting the late Mexican-American Tejano/pop singer Selena Quintanilla-Perez's rise to fame:

You know, remember the part with the tour bus, Big Bertha and then these two cholos [gangsters] in a low-rider, they pass by and then they help um, pull um, out and then the bumper comes off of the low-rider? Whoever picked those two guys that is exactly how they talk in El Paso? Because they were supposed to be in the West Texas area and they nailed that one man. Because I heard it and I am like "they're, they're from there." That was a really, really good job I think of uh . . . yeah, yeah, to me it is. Like I was saying I always bring up that example of those two guys, I'm like "those guys are from the area and they're not from the area, they did a lot of research and they really nailed that one." Um, because again

there is a difference in intonation from a, again if they had cast some guys from L.A. and done the accent from L.A. and tried to pass them off as El Paso *cholos*, and you can pick it up and it is annoying. Um, but yeah, it does surprise me, a lot, when I see that sort of thing.

Referring again to the credibility of those in charge of casting the characters, writing the scripts and the actors' performances, Armando expressed his enjoyment of these nameless characters.

Accents are something that we may be less aware of when we speak with people who have a similar accent. Until we hear someone inaccurately attempting to mimic an accent, we might not pay much attention to accents. For instance, during my fieldwork, I met with Laura, a friend from graduate school, and her sister Elena, when our conversation shifted to Latino characters' accents, Laura jokingly said, "I remember once, someone told me I had 'an East L.A. accent'. I'm like [laughs], 'I don't have an accent.'" This is a fairly typical comment that people make when trying to humorously deflect attention from their regional accent. However, it was a comment that expresses the sort of everyday conversations people tend to have about accents, suggesting the accents viewers observed in Latino characterizations sound particularly unnatural, and therefore, deserving of more attention.

Several viewers in separate interviews compared these types of realism oversights to Anglo American actors playing European characters, explaining that actors typically spend time studying accents and language to ensure greater realism in their performances, regardless of the fact that they are speaking in their native language. Viewers mentioned examples of U.S. actors such as "Gwyneth Paltro" and "Renee Zellweger" who are

criticized for their performances of European characters “if their accent is not correct,” as Belinda said. In this regard, accurate accents were perceived as an essential to the believability of actors’ performances, and something they must study and know before performing any particular identity.

Viewers also expressed dissatisfaction with Latino actors who perform roles that are in viewers’ opinion not believable cultural representations. Andy, a second generation Mexican American security guard I approached while he was working, expressed his disappointment with Latino actors who accept fictional roles that lack cultural realism:

There is not really . . . many actors out there that I could say represent the culture They are making a living just like anyone else. But they have the chance to bring it out...to show people what is going on and . . . their fame is more important than to show reality . . . so I find that sad. I do.

Viewers also recognized actors need to have scripts that are in their words “well-written,” to the extent that scripts include some realistic details that reflect how people experience their ethnic identity in the real-world. This is especially important to consider if the characteristics that casting directors, producers, writers and directors are emphasizing are not consistent with viewers’ perceptions of their Latino identities.

Casting Practices

Because portraying the diversity of Latino populations was a common topic of conversation during my discussions with viewers, I was interested in learning about viewers’ opinions of Latino actors performing Latino identities other than their own (e.g. a Puerto Rican actor cast as a Mexican American character). Because casting Latina/o actors for roles that require playing characters with different Latino ancestry is a common

practice, this was a topic some viewers raised without any prompting. While there were some differences of opinion among viewers regarding this casting practice, viewers generally agreed that this casting decision can affect character believability, as evident in their comments concerning accents.

Although, some viewers prefer to see a Mexican American actor play a Mexican American character, most of the viewers I interviewed did not have a problem with Latino actors playing Latino characters with a Latino heritage other than the actor's own as long as their performance was "believable," as Armando explained:

Yeah, I think it is fine, but as long as it is believable. You know and um, because in the eyes of whoever put it together or in the ears of them, it is like "as long as the person is speaking Spanish who cares." You know, that's how they [industry professionals] come across, you know?

Here again, his concerns had to do with television professionals attention to cultural differences within Latino populations. Describing what she perceived as a successful example of casting a Latino actor to play a Latino character with a different origin-nationality, Belinda said:

For instance, what's his name Esai Morales, in *American Family*, he plays a Mexican [American], but he is Puerto Rican. But I don't mind it because he speaks the Spanish, because he'll speak the Spanish the way we speak it. So then it doesn't, well no it doesn't bother me at all.

Even though there was some hesitation in Belinda's response, she decided she did not mind that a Puerto Rican actor was cast as a Mexican American character because she found his performance believable. Generally, viewers preferred to see Latino actors cast

for Latino roles, as opposed to non-Latino actors. This was a fairly common response because they wanted the industry to employ more Latinos actors.

The practice of hiring non-Latino actors for Latino roles conjured up negative reactions when viewers considered discriminatory casting practices in the early years of film and television productions. When I asked Armando, “Is it okay for a non-Latino actor to play a Latino character if they do it well?” he said, “the immediate answer would be to say ‘no’ . . . how can you have like in the 50s or whenever it was . . . they would have Italians play Latinos.”

Armando hesitantly continued by saying, “But, if he is a good actor and he can do it. He can get away with it.” While Armando suggested, “there is a lot of credibility to having a Latino play another Latino,” he objected to such limitations on casting practices because he believed it would also hinder Latino actors’ opportunities to perform non-Latino roles. Though Armando believed other Latino viewers might not agree with his perception or reasoning, in separate interviews, several other viewers made similar statements, suggesting as Armando did, acting involves performing or “pretending” to be someone other than one’s actual self. Conveying the opinion that acting involves convincing the audience of a character’s believability, viewers made statements such as, “They’re actors that’s their job.” For this reason, viewers suggested actors should either have first-hand knowledge of how to perform the Latino identity they are portraying or they should study the Latino identity they are portraying. They expressed dissatisfaction when actors are cast for roles “they don’t know” how to portray, and it is clear in their performance. For instance, actress Shelley Morrison, the actress who played the Latina maid character Rosario in the program *Will & Grace*, is a person of direct Spanish

ancestry, rather than Latin American ancestry. Yet, this was not an issue when viewers discussed the Rosario character, possibly because their attention was focused more on her depiction as a maid to a wealthy Anglo woman. Moreover, Shelley Morrison's ethnic background was not as well publicized as Spanish film actors Antonio Banderas and Penelope Cruz.

Even though the actors hired to play Latino characters are not always Latino persons, whether viewers were troubled by this casting practice might also depend on whether the performance was believable as well as whether there were other Latino actors playing Latino characters in the cast. For instance, Masiela Lusha is an Albanian actress who played "Carmen Lopez," the daughter of a Puerto Rican mother "Angie Lopez," and a Mexican American father "George Lopez" on *George Lopez*, the only Latino-themed program on ABC. Even though most of the viewers I spoke to were familiar with the *George Lopez* program, no one seemed to question Lusha's performance as a non-Latina actress playing a Latina character.

Seemingly, viewers found Lusha's portrayal believable or possibly they were unaware that she is not a Latina actress. The latter is possible since Lusha is the only non-Latina/o actress or actor cast as a member of the fictional Lopez family. Consequently, viewers might not have questioned her identity. Moreover, the fact that she is a secondary character might have influenced how closely viewers considered her performance, particularly since there was nothing they seemed to find troublesome about her performance. When viewers did discuss Lusha's role as Carmen, they spoke about the realism of the program's narratives. For instance, several viewers took issue with Carmen's parents' decision to allow her teenage boyfriend move into their home. As

Andy put it, “that would never happen [in a Mexican American family].” What viewers did appreciate about this particular storyline was that George and Angie Lopez were depicted as more involved in their children’s lives than Carmen’s boyfriend’s parents. This storyline received far more attention than the believability of Lusha’s performance as a Latina character. In this instance, they drew some distinctions between Mexican American and Anglo American families’ interactions with their children.

Presumably, in addition to her acting ability, Lusha’s physical appearance was a consideration in the decision to cast her as Carmen Lopez, a Mexican American/Cuban American character. The casting directors for the program probably assumed the audience would believe that she was a Latina character, given her olive complexion, dark brown eyes and dark brown hair. While certainly it seems the viewers I interviewed did find Lusha believable as a third generation Mexican American/Cuban American character, viewers were concerned about whether characterizations collectively reflect the physical diversity of Latino populations, moreover, whether casting decisions involved forms of social typing that restrict the roles actors play based on their physical appearances. Whereby, viewers considered why persons with darker complexions such as George Lopez are less often portrayed in leading roles.

At the most basic level, as Georgina articulated, “People want to see themselves physically represented [on television].” Similarly, commenting on the notable absence of darker mestizo images on English language television, Elizabeth motioning to her sister said, “Most of the Latina representations are so White. I want to see more positive characters that look like we look.” Comparing her appearance to the appearances of the characters she sees on television, Elizabeth wanted to see more Mexican characters like

George Lopez, with darker complexions. While notably successful actresses with lighter complexions such as Eva Longoria Parker, Jessica Alba and Constance Maria have made great strides in terms of advancing the visibility of Latina actresses in prime-time English language television programs, Elizabeth's observation speaks to a larger issue of television programs generally idealizing Whiteness. Because television programs are known for portraying persons whose beauty producers and casting directors believe viewers might wish to emulate, viewers can only assume the notable absence of darker mestizo images suggests that having such an appearance is less valued by television casting and production teams.

Beyond just the issue of wanting to see images that are more reflective of their own physical appearances, several viewers mentioned that they were troubled by what they believe was producers' general ignorance regarding how varied physical appearances are among Latino populations. When expressing the importance of portraying a wider spectrum of physical appearances, viewers sometimes referred to differences in the appearances of their family members. For instance, Georgina, who said people are surprised to learn she is Mexican American and not Anglo American "because of [her] coloring and features," said her parents have "darker complexions." Then she pointed to her friend Eva, and commented on how Eva is "the only dark skinned [person] in her family." Likewise, Georgina appreciated the physical diversity of the fictional Lopez family in the program *George Lopez*. "I think the *George Lopez* show is good because . . . he's very dark. She's more of the typical. I guess within Latinos she is considered light, even though I think me and her are the same complexion type."

Georgina might have wanted to see this sort of physical diversity portrayed in television programs, given the varying physical appearances within her family.

To a certain extent, it seemed viewers wanted characters' physical appearances to counter the idea that there is a Latina/o look. Although viewers were concerned that there are not many darker Mexican American characters in leading roles, some viewers made comments indicating they also wanted to see Latino characters viewers might not initially assume are Latino characters. Although, we were discussing Latino television characterizations, Estelle commented, "The movie-going public needs to know that not all Mexicans look like Juan Diego." In agreement, her husband Henry followed her comment by saying, "The dark hair. The dark skin." To which, she replied, "Or the Indian, yeah." Estelle wanted to see more Latino characters on television that reflect the physical diversity of Mexican and Mexican American populations, though she preferred to see Latino actors playing these characters. She explained, "Mexico has red-headed people, green-eyed people . . . your first reaction is 'Oh, they are gringos' . . . and of course, nothing but Spanish comes out of their mouth. And that's okay, they're Mexicans." As Estelle indicated, viewers are attuned to looking for other indications that someone is Latino, even when persons do not have a so-called Latina/o look.

Stuck on One Formula

Casting directors, producers, writers and directors attempt to include characters in their productions that their audiences can identify as somehow related to their realities (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, Noriega, 2000). Yet, interestingly, when asked, non-Latino industry executives seem to acknowledge that they are uncertain about what sorts of Latino characterizations appeal to Latino viewers:

Everyone in the Industry is aware of the growing Latino market, but no one knows how to reach the market. We have to figure out how to reach Hispanic eyeballs Every company is trying to create characters that make money (Studio executive, quoted in Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, Noriega, 2000, n.p.).

If the Latino audience can be reached with a product that appeals to them, you will see other studios and networks jumping on the bandwagon to develop the product. And the product will include Latino actors and Latino-themed material (Studio executive, quoted in Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, Noriega, 2000, n.p.).

The above quotes were published in a study commissioned by the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI). The opinions they expressed were representative of the comments made by a number of non-Latino studio executives and directors working in the English-language television industry (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, Noriega, 2000). While their comments reflect their commercial rather than social interests, throughout the program development process, industry professionals are well aware that ethnic portrayals can inspire negative reactions (Turow, 1978). Yet, clearly, television executives seem unclear about how to approach Latino characterizations or “Latino-themed material” (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, Noriega, 2000, n.p.).

Television creators and producers tend to have very little information about their audiences. Most production decisions are based on assumptions about how the audience will interpret program content, not on empirical audience research. Most often, television

professionals rely on the opinions of their colleagues and the success of other productions to predict audiences' reactions to characterizations or program content. The television industry has an organizational culture that encourages conventionality, in which, one's credibility depends on adherence to colleagues' expectations, allowing for a culture where ideas are more often reinforced rather than challenged (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Turow, 1978; Webster, Phalen & Lichty, 2006).

Consequently, productions rarely deviate much from the formulaic practices evident in numerous other productions. The art of avoiding a larger than necessary financial risk typically involves adhering to the same formulas credited for contributing to other programs success (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Gitlin, 1983). Productions also rely on these practices to provide a certain amount of predictability, assuming viewers experience some degree of satisfaction when a program's characters and narratives fulfill their pre-existing or conditioned expectations (Smith, 1999). However, problems can still arise when the standard fare of characterizations evoke negative reactions from viewers. In the case of this field study, these negative reactions led viewers to assume industry professionals lacked an adequate knowledge of their cultures, suggesting those with creative control believe the clichés they present in their programs. Because television writers at times rely on "instinct rather than conscious thought," assuming "the . . . lines . . . will . . . pour onto the paper while [they] are writing away," as one writer described (Smith, 1999, p. 47), scripts can reflect writers' cultural suppositions.

Many of the roles Latino actors are hired to play are supportive roles, involving daily rather than longer-term contracts (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 1999, Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 2000). Typically, casting for minor roles relies

more heavily on what the industry cleverly terms “clichés” instead of using the more widely used term “stereotypes” (Turow, 1978, p. 20). Because script breakdowns⁸ for smaller parts often include fewer guidelines, industry professionals often resort to using familiar clichés for these roles (Turow, 1978). Casting professionals tend to discuss roles with regard to character types, revealing broad social generalizations. For instance, in one study, casting professionals reportedly “. . . agreed that ‘street people programs’ like ‘Baretta’ and ‘Kojak’ require ‘grubby,’ ‘ethnic-looking’ types for most parts while shows like ‘Quincy’ and ‘Police Women’ have ‘real’ people who are ‘a step above the grubbiness of Baretta’” (Turow, 1978, p. 21). These sorts of cultural assumptions are still evident in casting practices (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 2000), and revealing, given the implied social hierarchy, with some characters described as socially inferior to the more “real” characters viewers should admire.

The viewers I interviewed were displeased that Latino characterizations tended to include the same clichés or stereotypes repeatedly in many different programs, regardless of the genre. As Tomás explained it, television writers and directors are “stuck on . . . this formula;” and this is “the problem:”

And again it is the quality of the writers and the quality of the people making the decisions. You know do they really have the knowledge to say “okay, go ahead with the story and keep these Mexicans, as you know, as people riding burros [donkeys] or selling porn out of their shopping cart?” . . . That is not all there is and that’s the problem they are *stuck on one formula*. And they use this formula .

⁸ Script breakdowns offer brief plot synopses and character descriptions for casting and other production purposes.

. . there is a formula for a crime. There is a formula for comedy . . . but it is finding that person that can write and direct it and make a quality product.

Although Tomás recognized that genres involve using particular production practices evident in characterizations, he believed Anglo portrayals were more diverse. Here again, Tomás related this difference to the knowledge and skills of the professionals “making the decisions.”

Eldridge, Kitzinger and Williams (1997) caution against overstating the power of the viewer when privileging the meanings they draw from media texts. In so doing, researchers sometimes “lose sight of the politics of production and distribution” (Eldridge, Kitzinger & Williams, 1997, p. 139). Even though viewers can offer critical interpretations of media texts, “The power to switch the television on or off, or integrate the set creatively into your life, is not comparable with the power to produce or influence programme content” (Eldridge, Kitzinger & Williams, 1997, p. 139; see also Gibson, 2000). Although viewers can engage in a critical discourse that can ultimately have some influence on media content, they⁹ are not in a position to change the content. The viewers I interviewed were keenly aware of this difference in power between program producers and members of their audiences. Consequently, it was really a question of what viewers perceived as the reasons why Latino persons were portrayed in the particular ways they observed in fictional television characterizations.

Certainly, the viewers I spoke with were accustomed to recognizing the specific characterizations they perceived as the most troubling or as the most symbolic of Anglos’

⁹ Even though I also consider myself a “viewer” per se, I recognize that my position as a media researcher with some industry experience and access to people working within the industry offers a degree of power not afforded to the viewers I interviewed.

views of Latino persons in real-world situations. With this concern in mind, Tomás and other viewers questioned why Latino characters were often in undesirable secondary-roles rather than in leading roles. These observations, which I will explain in more detail in Chapter 4 on the Screen, prompted viewers to discuss the stereotypical role assignments they perceived as problematic. Mainly because they believed this imbalance negatively portrays Latino identities as Belinda and other viewers indicated. With this concern in mind, Belinda said, “You don’t really see anything positive. It is always the negative aspects of Latinos. I mean yes, I know there’s gangsters. There’s *cholos* [gangsters] and everything, but that is all we ever actually see.” She complained, “...There is hardly ever a professional aspect to the portrayals. Why does it always have to be a guy, that comes from a, a poor family?”

She explained as Estelle, a retired school secretary, did in another conversation, “It could be a second, third, fourth generation Latino. Why is it, it’s always the immigrants? Let’s see something else.” Nelly, who enjoyed detective stories, said “*Matlock. Perry Mason*. Why couldn’t you have Mexicans doing the same type of thing?” Then, commenting about the Latina character Gabrielle “Gaby” Solis on the ABC program *Desperate Housewives*, Estelle said, “That’s not a positive character . . . why does she have to be a slut?”

As they listed one character type after another there was more frustration in their tones of voice. Their comments would then lead to questions about why the portrayals were so limited and comparisons to real Latino persons vastly different from the characters they observed on television. Elizabeth, a high school teacher said, “Why don’t you see any Latino characters in programs like *E.R.*? We’re not all poor. We don’t all live

in the ghetto. Look at all the professionals and doctors. Yet all you see are images of *cholas* and home girls [gang members] and the hot Latina woman.”

Voicing a similar complaint, Victor said, “What I don’t like is how unintelligent and from the street a lot of characters are. That is not really the case.” Victor, who is third generation Mexican American and probably eighteen or nineteen years old, overheard a conversation I had with two Latina viewers at the coffee shop where he worked. He was cleaning tables near where we were sitting when he joined in on our conversation. He offered to talk with me more after he finished his shift. Later, Victor mentioned that he wanted to see more Latino characterizations on televisions that are similar to him, not the “from the street” characters he described. “You always see people wearing baggy clothes, shaved heads, heavy make-up on and lip liner. I want to see Mexicans listening to something besides hip-hop, characters that are into the literature of our culture.”

Georgina also said something similar, complaining about the absence of characters with experiences similar to her own and other Latino persons she knows:

You always see the same stories. Okay for Blacks and Latinos it’s the same thing. There has to be poverty, or gangs or drugs . . . the maids and the help, the janitor, all those stereotypes everyone knows already . . . You meet people in college . . . and those people that you meet you hear their stories, [and] you are like, ‘where is that in the media?’ I mean what percentage of college students are Latino? And you’ve never seen that kind of character on a show!

As Georgina and other viewers recounted character types they believed reinforced negative perceptions of Latinos, they complained that there were few if any Latino characters on television with characteristics, professions and life experiences similar to

their own. Instead, they complained that they were too frequently bombarded with the same images of poor immigrants, criminal types, hired help and sexualized Latino characters.

In conversation after conversation, viewers repeatedly raised similar concerns about limited portrayals. They questioned why there are few Latino characters in the sorts of leading roles they observed in Anglo characterizations (i.e. college students, doctors and other middle to upper class educated professionals). Georgina and other viewers assumed television professionals were unaware that there were many educated Latinos not living in impoverished situations. Their observations were especially telling when one considers television programs tendency to portray middle to upper class characters in leading roles; and writers intentionally encouraging the audience to identify with these protagonists by focusing their narratives on these characters. Over time audiences develop an understanding and liking of main protagonists (Cook, 2007; Smith, 1999). Secondary and antagonist characters are less often the focus of program narratives; and therefore, viewers were concerned these characters were depicted in ways that provoked fewer positive reactions and less cultural understanding (Cook, 2007; Smith, 1999).

Proximity to Industry

Viewers' proximity to industry-related businesses and professionals seemed to contribute to their knowledge of production practices. Because programs often attempt to reflect aspects of life in Los Angeles communities, I expected them to make comparisons to fictional portrayals. However, I had not considered the ways this proximity to industry businesses might impact their perceptions of production decisions. After reflecting on this idea, I had to consider their experiences and my own experiences working and living in

Los Angeles that summer. Moreover, I had to consider the ways such experiences might have informed the tone of viewers' comments, a tone that suggested they felt confident making certain assertions about what takes place during a program's development and production stages.

Living in Los Angeles, it was not uncommon for viewers to know someone who worked or hoped to work in the television industry. Rob talked about working with someone at the grocery store who was an aspiring actor. What his co-worker said about his experiences trying to find work in the industry probably influenced Rob's opinions. Likewise, Javier talked about interacting with celebrities such as Salma Hayek working at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles. Regina and I saw a former *Beverly Hills 90210* co-star shopping in the grocery store in West Hollywood the same day we attended a program taping at one of the studios. Because people in the industry mainly live and work in Los Angeles, the television industry can intersect with viewer's daily lives. As I said in Chapter 2, viewers recounted times when they were just driving down the street and saw crews filming scenes. In our brief conversation, during his work break, Michael talked about observing a music video shoot in his neighborhood.

For those who do not have these experiences outside of the studios, there are opportunities to attend program tapings. When Regina and I decided we wanted to attend a program taping, Regina searched online for information about the locations and times where shows were taping. We decided to attend a taping of the sitcom *Love Inc.*, a series that premiered on UPN in September 2005. That summer, they were taping episodes at Paramount Studios in preparation for the series premiere during the upcoming fall season, so we decided to attend a taping as members of the studio audience. Free tickets are

typically available for most shows. To attend the taping, we had to arrive at the studios at the time the website indicated and stand in a security check line. Even though admission was not guaranteed and was based on the number of audience seats available, most of the people in line were able to attend the taping. When we entered the studio, we were given some instructions by an unknown comedian in charge of entertaining the audience. Before the taping begins the comedian introduced the cast.

Although *Love Inc.* included big name lead actresses, such as Holly Robinson Peete, it had a relatively brief run, and was cancelled after only twenty-two episodes. In the program, a less well-known actress Ion Overman played a first-generation Latina character named Viviana, who was more overtly sexual than the other female characters. The program's narratives focused on the work and dating lives of the employees of a dating service. Viviana, the receptionist for the dating service, was a secondary character. She had fewer lines than the other characters. When the other female characters interacted outside of the office, Viviana was the only female character that was not a part of the scenes.

When Overman spoke after she was introduced as a member of the cast, she did not have a foreign sounding accent. Regina reminded me of this after we heard Overman speaking with an unnatural sounding Spanish accent during her performance. This oversight was more of a reflection of a poor casting decision and Overman's performance, assuming she was not advised to speak in an unnatural sounding foreign accent for comedic purposes. If the latter was the case, Regina and I failed to find the humor in her performance. Although, Regina and I had looked forward to attending the taping, our enthusiasm diminished after we heard Viviana speak. At one point, the

character Viviana compared herself to a client of the dating service, and jokingly said she “would marry for [U.S. citizenship] papers.” Regina and I gasped and looked at each other when she said this line. Apparently, the Anglo writing staff found this line not only entertaining, they also found it humorous. I watched them as they laughed, nodded their heads and looked at one another as if to say, “That was a good line.” Seemingly, they did not realize some viewers might find Viviana’s line offensive, and not at all humorous.

Probably after he noticed our reaction, an African American-appearing man sitting next to Regina told her that he was an extra in the series’ pilot. After telling her this, he said Overman was not a Latina actress; according to him, Overman was African American and Anglo American, not of Latin American ancestry. He claimed Overman told him this when they interacted during the taping of the pilot. Although I have not been able to confirm this in an *L.A. Times* article titled “Don’t make a date with ‘Love Inc.’”, one reporter commenting on the cast wrote, “The show costars Holly Robinson Peete as Clea, ‘Love, Inc.’s’ owner and founder. There’s also a wacky-neighbor-as-staff-photographer and two other women, including the Latino one, or the one playing at a Latino; anyway, she’s all about getting a green card” (Brownfield, 2005, para. 5). Brownfield suggested Overman was not Latina and instead “playing . . . a Latin[a].” This might explain in part why Overman's performance lacked believability.

Interestingly, the cast included a Latina actress. Actress Reagan Gomez-Preston, whose father is from Puerto Rico, was cast as Francine, an African American dating consultant for the agency. Possibly, the casting agency for the series assumed Overman’s physical appearance and her experience playing other Latina roles made her a natural choice for the role of Viviana. However, it was interesting that Gomez-Preston was not

cast as a Latina character. These casting decisions seemingly support my informants' and Latino Screen Actors' Guild members' assertions that casting professionals hire actors with particular physical appearances (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 2000).

While I cannot say that I followed the series after attending this taping, Regina and I were both troubled by Viviana's characterization. Before the taping began, Regina interacted playfully with the comedian entertaining the audience. When he asked members of the audience where they were from, Regina jokingly said "Cuba," even though she is second generation Mexican American with a Californian accent. We both laughed after she said this. Maybe we also found it humorous because we believed the comedian did not realize she was joking. Later, between scenes, after we heard Viviana say she "would marry for papers," the comedian tried to keep the audience energized. Looking for a volunteer he said, "What about our friend from Cuba?" Then, Regina motioned to him not to speak to her and said "No, don't, don't." He seemed to get the hint and turned his attention to other members of the audience. After hearing about Viviana's search for an American husband, Regina did not care to stay until the taping finished. She stayed only to appease my research interests.

Although I cannot attest to the reliability of the source, in an online publication of an interview, Overman apparently described her character Viviana as "an Argentinean national," who "desperately needs to find a husband so she can get a green card" (Steinberg, 2005, para. 2). According to the online source, after she was asked "Does Viviana go to great lengths to find a husband or is she using her job at the dating service to find a husband?" Overman said:

Every week on the show she talks about how she needs to find a husband.

Potential guys who call up the agency she might ask them questions, we've only done 4 shows at this point. I'm sure as the season progresses we're going to see more details as to what Viviana does outside the office. As of now, any able bodied American man who walks through the door is a potential victim (Steinberg, 2005, p. 98)!

This response seemed consistent with what we observed during the taping. In this interview, Overman acknowledged her character's secondary role when she commented on the audience not having a lot of information about Viviana's life outside of the office. Although a dating service was the premise of the program, they could have conceptualized the character Viviana differently. Even though none of the viewers I interviewed mentioned this characterization because the program had not yet aired on UPN, they expressed concerns about other secondary, sexualized, immigrant character types.

When I saw this sort of characterization, I could not help but think, "A hot Latina immigrant with a thick accent, hoping to marry an American is the image that came to the program's creators and writers' minds when they think about developing a Latina character that would work in a dating service." Viviana could have been the second-generation only daughter of parents, who were concerned that she was still single and approaching thirty years of age. Therefore, her mother often called her at work to pressure her about finding someone, getting married and having children sooner, rather than later. This was just one example that came to mind. Such a characterization would have still included some cultural generalizations. However, I would argue that it would

not have inspired as negative a reaction as a character dilemma involving her immigration status and consequential desire to victimize an unsuspecting American male. Moreover, Viviana's character would have been more consistent with the types of characterizations viewers suggested they would prefer to see in fictional programs. I will explain more about this later in Chapter 5, Character Development.

What Anglo Producers and Writers Want to Portray

Latino portrayals reflect "What they want you to see," was another explanation viewers gave for why they believed Latino portrayals tended to not reflect the diversity of the Latino population. To support their perception, a number of viewers discussed the absence of Latino portrayals, assuming those working in the television industry were also well aware of the size of the Latino population. This assumption supported their belief that the exclusion of Latino characters was intentional, as Georgina suggested.

"If they [programs' producers] were more realistic as to what they are trying to represent, if you do a show in L.A. you don't have all these White people" Referring to the television program *Beverly Hills 90210* as an example, Georgina, who also worked as a substitute teacher, continued by saying:

Beverly Hills 90210 had one Jewish girl and she was the poor kid. If you go to Beverly Hills . . . the majority of the kids in the school aren't White. They are Middle Eastern and the Jewish kids are the rich kids you know? . . . If they just let go a little bit and be more realistic in those representations . . . make it realistic as to the demographics of that area.

In a separate conversation, another viewer Javier said that the first time he watched an episode of *Beverly Hills 90210* he was shocked by the lack of diversity of the cast

because of the program's setting. After bringing up the program as an example of television programs failing to portray the diversity of communities in L.A., Javier explained, "When *90210* came in, I'm like, 'you got to be kidding me.' I'm like 'God damn!'"

Ironically, many television programs are set in locations that have sizable, if not nearly majority Latino populations. Large urban cities, mainly, Los Angeles, New York City and Miami are frequently the backdrops for television programs developed in the U.S. Yet, programs set in these major cities portray a fictional U.S. where Latinos and other ethnic and racial groups are often "out of the picture," so-to-speak. During scenes where cameras scan an array of extras hired to represent everyday people in neighborhoods, in workplaces, in restaurants, on the streets, seemingly, the populations in these cities lack any kind of ethnic diversity (Hoffman, 2003; Hoffman & Noriega, 2004a; Hoffman & Noriega, 2004b; Rodríguez, C., 1997). Undeniably, this is not the case. With the recent growth in the Latino population, particularly in the number of persons born in the U.S., Latinos are continually contributing to a "mainstream"¹⁰, or a U.S. identity, although this is frequently not apparent in television programs.

Intentional Exclusion

For viewers, character roles and positions in casts and the visibility of Latinos in fictional settings communicate more than just simply a casting decision. Andy felt the practice of casting minorities in less celebrated secondary roles "puts minorities in the

¹⁰Mainstream is a commonly used term that refers to the general TV viewing audience or the widest cross-section of the TV viewing audience. Often however, the term "mainstream" is used to implicitly or explicitly to refer to Anglo American viewers as the targeted and ideal viewing audience (Gray, 1995). I argue that Latino and other ethnic-minority viewers are also part of the "mainstream" audience.

back.” In this regard, viewers perceived some commonalities between Latinos and other minority portrayals, particularly non-Latino African Americans. From these viewers’ perspectives, casting minorities in secondary and supporting roles rather than in visible leading roles denies their social contributions.

Further expressing this idea, Andy, a security guard I approached while he was working, mentioned a dramatic fictional series based on the war in Iraq called *Over There*. Andy described the series as a blatant example of the program’s producers “only showing you what they want you to see.” Although the premise of the show as Andy described it, focused on the experiences of U.S. soldiers deployed in Iraq, Andy felt that it was not realistic to have only “one Hispanic” character in the program. Before mentioning the program *Over There*, Andy reflected on the experiences of two of his uncles, who after emigrating from Mexico decided to enlist in the U.S. military to avoid deportation. As Andy recounted stories of their experiences in the U.S. military during the Vietnam Era, he reflected on how the program *Over There* attempted to depict the gritty realities of the Iraq war, yet the program’s characters were mainly Anglo Americans and non-Latino African Americans. From Andy’s perspective, it was “sad” that the program’s imagery of U.S. soldiers as “the good guys,” who suffered because of their service to the U.S., largely ignored the sacrifices of “Chicano” soldiers, who in reality comprise a sizable portion of the U.S. armed services.

Andy compared *Over There* to an episode of *American Family*, a program now in off-network and public broadcasting syndication about the Gonzalez family, a fictional Mexican American family living in East Los Angeles. Andy described an episode of *American Family* when one of the Gonzalez sons died while deployed in Iraq as an army

medical doctor, while trying to save someone else's life. Andy described the characterization of the son and the narrative as "something I could watch and say 'oh, I could relate to the situation of that guy fighting in Iraq'":

That. . . stood with me because the war is going on right now in Iraq and believe it or not a lot of soldiers are dying and half of them are minorities and they are not getting recognized . . . They are *not* coming out with these headlines in the L.A. Times " . . . Chicano got killed off of in Iraq." . . . They always say, "U.S. soldiers died." . . . But they never get into details of what happened . . . I kind of find that sad.

While Andy was not in the military or a doctor, he was able to "relate to" the characters' experiences and the narrative in this particular episode. In part because he viewed it as a deviation from the way Mexican American soldiers are usually depicted in fictional television and in news programs. Many of the characterizations viewers suggested they liked or would like to see on television deviated from the ways viewers believed Latino persons are often depicted on television, as Andy suggested. Moreover, he identified with the *American Family* portrayal because of its social relevance given the recent Iraqi War and the U.S. military occupation of the country. He had an active interest in the issue, evident in his attention to the newspaper articles. Aware socially significant issues attract viewers' attention, television program developers and writers often depict issues or events that receive notable public attention, such as the war in Iraq. However, in this case, while Andy might have been initially attracted to the program *Over There* because of the premise of the program, he was disappointed by the lack of diversity in the cast. In his opinion, this was intentional rather than a consequence of other production factors.

Token Secondary Characters

Even though the viewers I interviewed wanted to see more Latino characters in television programs, they were strongly opposed to including what Georgina referred to as “the one token character.” Viewers were concerned industry professionals believed adding a character or a Latino-themed program here or there, automatically attracts Latino viewers. With noted sarcasm, Tomás imagined television producers sometimes decide, “Let’s put in this one Hispanic guy or let’s put in this one Black guy just to be multicultural.” For viewers, it seemed as though a program’s producers were just bending to the pressure to include a Latino character when “they just thr[e]w someone in out of the blue” as Tomás. By describing this practice, as “just throw[ing] someone in out of the blue,” Tomás suggested these characters are not an integral part of the casts. Moreover, he suggested, “It is obvious when they try to do it. Because a lot of times that is not the best actor and they just pick them because they are Black or whatever.”

If characters were not an integral part of the cast and they lacked realistic details, their introduction seemed like a superficial effort to appease viewers’ interest in seeing their ethnic groups represented in the program. This practice further convinced viewers that production teams were not interested in understanding how they could more realistically portray Latinos in their programs. For viewers, it was not merely about reaching a quota of Latino characters. Viewers regularly expressed a desire to see Latino fictional characters with identities and expressions of culture conveyed in more believable ways. In Chapter 5 Character Development I discuss what viewers said about the sorts of realistic details they wanted to see presented in Latino fictional characterizations.

Not the Targeted Audience

Viewers were seemingly aware that fictional characters in television series tend to include the particular social identities program creators believe are reflective of their audiences or their audiences' entertainment interests (Cook, 2007; Gitlin, 1983; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, Noriega, 2000). With this in mind, Tomás and Armando articulated something that was implied or stated in nearly every conversation I had with viewers: "As Latino viewers, we are not the audience the industry is primarily targeting." Consequently, they contended producers of these images assumed it was necessary to convey the identity of Latino characters using the standard fare of clichés, seeing as these cues are widely recognizable by non-Latino viewers. Expressing his belief that Latino fictional portrayals rarely include realistic characteristics, Armando said:

I think that, I think that it is still pretty edgy, almost risky to present the Latino as he actually is . . . it is safer to show the maracas and the *piñatas* Because the perception is that is what people are going to understand What Middle America understands.

Armando's comment also raised another question that I did not further probe at the time: Why did he believe it is "almost risky to present the Latino as he actually is?" It seemed that he assumed this would involve some risk because it would require deviating from the characterizations industry executives believe Anglos audiences recognize as Latino characters. While interviews with industry executives suggest that they were open to portraying Latinos in a manner Latino viewers would not find objectionable (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, Noriega, 2000), Armando, as did other viewers, assumed industry professionals were more interested in producing images that appealed to Anglo or non-

Latino viewers than Latino viewers (Napoli, 2003). They presumed the ways industry professionals differentiated their audiences assumed viewers interests differed according to ethnicity.

Viewers contended industry professionals could include Latino characters that appeal to a wide audience, while still including information Latino viewers recognize as related to their experiences, as Georgina explained:

Characters don't have to be White to tell a story that can appeal to everyone.

Because I think they [professionals in the TV industry] have been so afraid to go outside of that physical visual image to tell a story, that they don't understand that White people can relate to George Lopez. Because the story he is selling is so broad and he throws in little details that Mexican people go "Oh yeah, that is totally our culture."

In this excerpt from our conversation, Georgina again referred to what she believed industry professionals "don't understand." Georgina presumed industry professionals making production and programming decisions believed only Anglo characters have a cross-cultural appeal. She further contended that they have a differing opinion when it concerns ethnic minority characters, which she presumed they believe only appealed to ethnic minority viewers. Here, again, Georgina raised the issue of including believable culturally informed "little details" in characterizations, even when the story involves broader cultural ideas. Viewers observations about the importance of believable details is something I will further explain in the following chapters. Regarding production decisions, their observations were telling concerning viewers' interpretations of cultural cues in characterizations.

Overreliance on Audience Demographics

Vanessa expressed another dominant opinion among the viewers I interviewed. Vanessa contended industry professionals might overemphasize the role of characters' ethnicities when targeting audiences. She believed many viewers could relate to George Lopez because his television program *George Lopez* and his stand-up acts were loosely based on his life. While Vanessa said that his program and his stand-up routines "in a way...kind of relates a little more to us [Latino viewers]," she believed whether viewers identified with his family narratives was more a matter of their family experiences than if they were "Mexican." "Not all families are raised the same, regardless if you are all Mexican or whatever." Vanessa continued, "If you were raised with certain things that are similar to [...George Lopez's fictional family]," then paused, shrugging her shoulders to suggest, "regardless of your ethnicity, you can relate to the program's characters."

For the same reason, several viewers also mentioned identifying with non-Latino characters, sometimes more so than Latino characters because they were more believable. For instance, Belinda said she really enjoyed *The Wonder Years*, a series that had a successful six-season run after premiering in 1988. *The Wonder Years* depicted a fictional Anglo family with two teenage boys, living in a suburban area in the late 1960's, early 1970's. Commenting about the need for more believable depictions, Belinda mentioned the series as an example of a program that seemed believable, after first saying:

I think it would be good to have shows that show the way life is, whether it is here or in Mexico or in China or wherever it is. It is good to have a show that shows how life is It's like *The Wonder Years*, I love that show. Because they showed the way life was in the, the . . . and so it is a good example of that era.

And of the, the 60s, of a middle class family growing up in a small town of America. Now that's the type of show that I like. And I'm not White and I didn't grow up in the 60s, but I enjoyed [the program] and I related to it.

Even though Belinda grew up in a densely populated area of East L.A., as one of four daughters of first-generation Mexican American parents, she “related to” the program’s characters and narratives because she found them believable. As a viewer, she was “able to understand and share the characters’ feelings, goals and perspective” (Cohen, 2001, p. 255), even when the experiences depicted differ from her own (Shapiro & Chock, 2003), particularly when the actors’ performance of the character conveyed believable emotions or what Hall (2003) refers to as “emotional realism” (p. 635). Conversely, a lack of emotional or other sorts of believability can lead to more cognitive distance than involvement with fictional characters (Hoorn & Konijn, 2003), as is the case in many of the characterizations described in previous sections in this chapter.

Both Belinda and Vanessa recognized how factors other than ethnicity can inspire stronger forms of cultural associations and identification with television characters. However, they presumed executives believed Latino viewers identified more with Latino characters than Anglo characters simply because of the ethnicity/race of the character. Their observations were consistent with what an industry insider told me about the marketing of television programs. My informant said television executives’ presumption that demographics dictate viewing habits, sometimes hinders advertising sales for minority-themed programs.

Writers and show creators who might wish to focus on the creative aspects of their work rather than on potential audiences are also forced to consider audience

demographics because industry culture dictates that they do so (Cook, 2007; Gitlin, 1983; Kubey, 2004; Smith, 1999; Turow, 1978; Webster, Phalen & Lichty, 2006). Evidence of this industry culture is most apparent in Nielsen's audience ratings system and in the marketing/advertiser sales side of the television business (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Napoli, 2003; Webster, Phalen & Lichty, 2006). It has been my observation that advertisers buy air time in programs they are not familiar with simply because they believe a particular program attracts certain demographics. Undoubtedly, demographic categorization of audiences according to age, gender, ethnicity/race, inoccupation, income, etc., dictate many decisions, given the fact that the commercial interests of the industry are driven by advertising sales and marketing promotions. Even though many professionals in the industry recognize the imperfect nature of demographic formulas for explaining or predicting audience behaviors, demographics are thought of as the commodity that is bought and sold (Lotz, 2007; Napoli, 2003; Webster, Phalen & Lichty, 2006). However, the question still remains: To what extent do demographics dictate entertainment interests? Even though Latino viewers might prefer to watch programs with Latino characters (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 1999; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 2000), the viewers I interviewed suggest there were other important considerations that influenced their receptions of characters and viewing habits.

Chapter Summary

When viewers observed stereotypical role assignments and characterizations that lacked cultural believability, they questioned the factors that contributed to these decisions. For the most part, the viewers I spoke with interpreted the lack of believability in many Latino portrayals as reflective of their observations that casting professionals,

producers and writers largely ignored the diversity of Latino populations (experiential, class, cultural, physical differences). Furthermore, they believed actors assumed some responsibility for their performances and the roles they accepted, based on the assumption that acting is a craft that involves convincing your audience of a character's believability. For this reason, viewers suggested actors should either have first-hand knowledge of how to perform the ethnic identity they are portraying or they should have studied the ethnic identity they were portraying. However, they recognized the need for actors to have roles and scripts that allowed for believable cultural representations.

Viewers clearly understood the production of television programs as a business. As such, they assumed television professionals focused more on the financial aspects of their businesses, rather than on character development research or issues of social responsibility. At the same time, they expected the industry to assume more social responsibility in terms of cultural portrayals and their influence on viewers' lived experiences.

They also were concerned that some character decisions were intentional, given television professionals interest in attracting primarily Anglo viewers. However, they contended ethnicity alone cannot inspire identification with characters. Their comments suggested they believed there were more salient aspects of culture that evoke forms of identification, outside of more generalized cultural assumptions often used in characterizations. In the following chapters, I will further discuss their perceptions of characters as they observed them On the Screen, in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5 Character Development, I will further discuss their ideas about how television professionals might

communicate characters' Latino identities and why an over emphasis on characters' ethnicity might not inspire positive viewer receptions.

CHAPTER 4: ON THE SCREEN

Chapter 3 Behind the Scenes focused on viewers' perceptions of television production decisions. In this chapter, I will explain viewers' perceptions of the Latino fictional characters developed during these productions. In particular, whether second and later generation Latino viewers found these characterizations believable Latino portrayals and the cultural messages viewers believed these characterizations conveyed to their audiences. Here, the focus is on the finalized edited versions of the characters, within the context of a program's narratives and genres.

I approached these conversations by first asking viewers "What do you think about the Latino characters you see in English language television programs?" Often, they compared Latino characters to themselves and other Latino persons without any prompting. My discussions with Latino viewers revealed more about viewers' receptions of fictional television characterizations and why believability was an important part of their receptions and ordinary conversations.

This chapter begins with a discussion of characterizations' life outside of the screen, followed by a discussion of the dominant themes that emerged in our conversations about Latino-themed programs. As the chapter progresses, I attempt to offer further insight into the complexities of their receptions of Latino characterizations in the sections: cultural believability more than idealized portrayals, cultural believability in the details, and finally, the dicey nature of humor. From these discussions, I hope readers can glean further insight into the importance of cultural believability in ethnic portrayals.

Characterizations Life Outside of the Screen

Viewers were particularly bothered by the way the repeated use of stereotypes reinforce the assumption that Latinos persons “are all the same,” as José explained. This is important to mention because viewers frequently expressed this perception when they responded to questions about characterizations. José, a college student that I first met at his home through a mutual acquaintance said that he found it offensive when non-Latino characters referred to a Latino character and said something such as, “Oh, Julio Pablo, whatever it’s all the same.” Although, he chuckled when he said it, he immediately said, “I hate that line. I mean that line just bothers me.” His comment and reaction expressed the manner in which ethnic characterizations were collectively considered by viewers. José was not referring to any particular character or program. Instead, he made a point of mentioning the sort of character line he had heard on more than one occasion. Although he suggested at times narratives may word such a statement slightly differently, his contention was with the dismissive way such statements portrayed Latino identities. Much of what viewers said indicated that they believed more realistic characters had a greater degree of individuality, in the sense that more realistic characters tended to deviate from well-known clichés that presumably define cultural differences.

Frustrating Experiences

José’s comments illustrated television portrayals life outside of the screen (Ellis, Streeter & Engelbrecht, 1983; Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Shapiro & Lang, 1991; Trotman Reid, 1979). With understandable frustration, José described some examples when people made statements suggesting they believed the stereotypes he saw in television programs. After expressing his disappointment with the prevalence of

stereotypical portrayals on television, he immediately shifted the discussion to an experience at his university. The way he shifted between the two topics revealed his association of television portrayals with people's ideas about Latino identities in real-world situations:

And that's another thing, you know why do they [television professionals] always stereotype us as like servers or you know? Even at the university I get that and it's like, you know you get some professors that are like "in this community are you more likely to find a Latino mowing our lawns [laughs] or [laughs]" you know what I mean? It's like "okay buddy."

When he said "even at the university," he seemed to imply that, in higher education institutions, he would not expect people to express stereotypical ideas, particularly a professor. In his daily routines, he was able to interact with people he felt comfortable assuming view him as an individual. For this reason, he was sometimes surprised when someone made a stereotypical statement about his ethnic identity.

Even though the professor's comment might not have been directed at him, he could not help but assume that professor had this opinion of him. José's laughter was sarcastic and expressed his frustration with the social barriers he sometimes encountered. He was disturbed that someone might suggest Latino persons would only be in their neighborhood "to mow their lawns." He said this after complaining, "Why do they always stereotype us as like servers or you know?" Referring to television portrayals, he was concerned that television characterizations reinforced cultural assumptions he was unable to escape, even at his university.

In these situations, people tend to have a heightened awareness of their ethnic identity. When describing a similar incident at the same university, José tried to make eye contact with a Latina student because he assumed she understood how he was feeling:

Like sometimes I am sitting in class and I was taking a gender studies class and everybody in the class knew what machismo was [laughs]. And there was no Latinos, but me and this other girl and we're just like "okay" [we both laugh].

And we are sitting in class and we are like okay this is weird [laughs]. You know why is it just our people that are kind of stigmatized.

Because people have similar experiences hearing stereotypical statements about their ethnic identity, individuals find non-verbal ways to communicate their discomfort (i.e. eye contact with people who have the same ethnic identity, discomfort gestures).

It is natural in these situations to look for acknowledgement from someone who might share one's discomfort. Similarly, when viewers watch television, and they interpreted a characterization as stereotypical, they tended to look at others to see if they shared their feelings, whether positive or negative. A met gaze or a similar facial expression often means another person shares one's opinion. For instance, my roommate Ileana and I watched the film *Spanglish* with our friend Jackie in our living room. At certain points in the film Ileana and Jackie looked towards one another. The shocked expressions on their faces, strained smiles, added to Jackie saying "Oh, my God," revealed their frustration with the use of stereotypes at some points during the film. When they noticed a shared reaction, their non-verbal communication likely validated their impressions of the portrayals. Likewise, it is natural for viewers to look for this validation by looking toward others who might have a similar reaction.

Normalizing Cultural Assumptions

It is also important to state that José was not suggesting Latino persons were the only persons stigmatized in television programs. At the end of our conversation, José said television characterizations “desensitize” viewers to stereotypes; since as he said, we “expect to see” certain stereotypes presented in programs. Using the example of “the blond, bombshell bimbo” character type, he explained:

So, when you see things on television it’s almost as if it is a norm, you know? And so you turn on the television and it’s almost like you expect to see something like that. Where you kind of like desensitize. So, you know when you really look at it and really think about it and you see these characters you think “if I hadn’t watched anything like this before, how would I feel?” You know, that is kind of what stuck in my mind right now.

When people spend time considering the ways portrayals might negatively influence non-Latino viewers’ perceptions about Latino persons, it can be emotionally draining. For this reason, José said sometimes he tried not to focus on the stereotypes because he saw the same sorts of images so frequently. To a certain extent, José also indirectly explained why non-Latino persons might believe the stereotypes they see in Latino characterizations. As he indicated, when viewers see the same cultural clichés over and over again, viewers not only expect to see these ideas, the ideas become normalized in the real-world.

As José suggested, ethnic stereotypes were so readily circulated non-Latino viewers may be more familiar with these stereotypes than more meaningful expressions of Latino cultures. In a separate conversation, comparing stereotypes of Latinos, or in this

case Mexicans, to stereotypes about other ethnic groups, Henry, a retired school custodian said “not all Mexicans eat beans and tortillas.” He continued by saying “And not all Asians,” when his daughter finished his thought by saying “know karate.” The ease with which his daughter tried to complete his thought conveyed people’s familiarity with these broad cultural generalizations.

José explained how stereotypes also draw unrealistic distinctions between different social identities. In his explanation, he referred to the “machismo” stereotype again, commenting “it’s totally over exaggerated [. . . because we are . . .] the only ones labeled [. . . and . . .] stigmatized.” Suggesting, “machismo . . . should be an international word,” José contended, “if you go into any culture . . . the Vietnamese, okay the Chinese, the Italians, any culture, if you ask any woman in any culture. . . they’re going to say [. . . there are machismo men in their culture]. Laughing at the idea that hyper masculinity is only considered characteristic of Latino men and tired of seeing the same stereotypical ideas repeatedly, José addressing writers and producers in the television industry, said “get over it.” In other words, he was suggesting producers and writers find another way to identify a character as Latino. This sort of reaction was not uncommon because viewers were generally disappointed by the prevalence of stereotypical characters.

Nearly every viewer I spoke with complained about the way cultural generalizations were often misused or inaccurately presented on television. For instance, Tomás, whose girlfriend was Armenian, made an important point about cultural differences when he talked about the “unnatural” distinctions stereotypes draw between cultures. Raising questions such as, “Why can’t you have the Black guy and the White guy that speak the same way? [Especially, when they . . .] live in same area.” Tomás

shared some common interests with his girlfriend despite their different cultural backgrounds. The fact that they both have parents who are immigrants living in L.A., presented some interesting similarities in terms of their experiences. Tomás explained why cross-culturally people might share similarities as well as differences that programs could more readily depict:

That is why I watch *American Family* because you do see that. You do see what you have in common and you do see what makes it different, so you can appreciate that. Just like in my job [as a police officer] I see people, and I see the same people, but painted in a different way. But, I might see someone from Africa that might have some of those qualities. I got a partner now who is Nigerian and he has similar qualities to other partners I've had that are of other races.

When comparing cultural similarities and differences, Tomás said he appreciated programs that portray cross-cultural similarities, yet recognize some differences. At the same time, some of Tomás' comments indicated that he was not above believing stereotypes about other groups, though he usually contrasted these ideas with an example of how the stereotypes he mentioned were not entirely accurate. Mainly, other viewers made statements similar to Tomás' comments, suggesting that they wanted to see their identity and culture expressed in a more natural, less overt way.

Viewer Fatigue

In view of the fact that the use of stereotypes was such a dominant concern for viewers, I was interested in understanding whether there were circumstances in which they believed stereotypes could be used in acceptable ways. Certainly, viewers recognized producers and writers intention to entertain their audiences. This was

particularly clear in their discussions of comedic characters, something that will be discussed in a later section of this chapter, titled The Dicey Nature of Humor. In general though, I was interested in learning about whether they believed stereotypes could have some cultural relevance or entertainment value.

Some viewers said that they were so tired of stereotypical roles that they wanted producers to avoid using them entirely. For instance, Elena, a third generation Mexican American social worker, said “I don’t want to see stereotypical characters in programs. Not a gang member, not poor [persons] with social services Show us succeeding in classrooms and not competing with different ethnic groups.” Her comment that she did not want to see Latino characters who receive “social services” was interesting given her profession. Again though, her comments seemed to be a response to her observation that there were more Latino television characters in socially undesirable roles than in positions where Latino characters were “succeeding,” academically and professionally, as she said. Her comments also reflected the way minorities were shown competing with other minorities and non-minorities in programs. Most viewers felt ethnic identity or race was too often used as character conflict to drive narratives. This was a reaction I will discuss further in Chapter 5, Character Development. Viewers tended to share this opinion, though they related it more to the development of new characters than to existing characters.

It was common for viewers to first say they were opposed to programs using stereotypes. Viewers expressed a general sense of fatigue when they reflected on the overuse of cultural generalizations in Latino characterizations. Even though most of the cultural generalizations they mentioned had a negative connotation, they also mentioned

some generalizations that were not entirely negative, namely, stereotypes about Latino families' closeness. They most readily observed these stereotypes in Latino-themed programs. These examples in particular reflected this viewer fatigue since they recognized that the generalizations were not entirely negative, aside from contributing to a narrow view of Latino cultures.

Latino-themed Programs

At the time of my field work, in 2005, re-runs of *American Family*, *Resurrection Blvd.* still aired on PBS and on cable networks in the Los Angeles television market. *Resurrection Blvd.*, like *American Family*, was a dramatic series that focused on a fictional Mexican American family living in East Los Angeles. Similarly, *George Lopez*, a situational comedy set in East L.A., focusing on the fictional Lopez family, headed by George, a Mexican American father and Angie Lopez, his second generation Cuban American wife, first aired on the ABC network in 2002. However, the production contract for *George Lopez* was not renewed for the 2008 fall season; after a five year run on the ABC network, *George Lopez* wrapped up production on the program's final season in 2007.

Varied Receptions

It is important to frame this discussion of the Latino-themed programs as programs viewers had differing opinions about concerning cultural believability. One fictional character such as George Lopez can never realistically portray all Latino viewers' experiences. Viewers did not necessarily see many commonalities between themselves and the characters in these Latino-themed programs.

Television narratives typically have two or more storylines occurring at the same time. What's more, often a lot of cultural cues are implicit rather than explicit, further leaving room for viewers to infer particular meanings or readings of characters and narratives from diverse perspectives. Even when a program is considered "successful," it is difficult to determine what viewers enjoy most about a program. In any given program, viewers can have diverse interpretations of different elements of programs or characters. For instance, they might enjoy some aspects of a character, yet they dislike other aspects of the same character, as described in the literature review in Chapter 1.

Referring to the *George Lopez* program, Victor said, "They make cracks and stuff about tortillas. Yeah, I don't relate to some of that kind of stuff. As far as feeling a close personal identification, I don't." He further explained even though the character was performed by a Mexican American actor George Lopez who loosely based the character on his own life the characterization still included "some stereotypes [. . . he would . . .] take out" of the program. As Victor said, "I grew up with the culture," expressing his cultural insider knowledge that validates his objection and his lack of identification with the character. However, some viewers disagreed with Victor's impressions of *George Lopez* and stated that to some extent they relate to the characters in the program. Because *George Lopez* was one of the few Latino-themed programs on English language television on a major broadcast network, it was often a topic of conversation during my fieldwork. Because there were few Latino-themed programs viewers were concerned about whether these programs reinforced stereotypes.

Need for Diverse Family Portrayals

Because Latino-themed programs tended to focus on fictional families, gender and relational topics naturally emerged in these discussions. During several separate conversations, viewers reflected on the absence of Latina mothers in Latino-themed programs. In *Resurrection Blvd.* and in *American Family*, the matriarchal characters were deceased, though in *American Family* the matriarch of the family, Berta Gonzalez, played by actress Sonia Braga, died during the series pilot and reappeared through her family members' memories or flashbacks in later episodes.

Claudia said one of the things that she enjoyed about *American Family* was her impression of the family patriarchal character, Jess Gonzales, as “the real strength of the family.” Concerned about what she perceived as the deteriorating state of American families, Claudia said “A lot of families I think fall apart, even though you have a mom, I really think you still need a dad.” While other viewers such as Anna appreciated seeing “united [Latino] families” on television because of their own families' closeness, many viewers also wanted to see alternatives to the large Latino family with a dominant Latino father character and a weak or deceased Latina mother character.

Expressing this idea, Miguel commented, “The women are always the stay-at-home moms and they rely on the father . . . the father is the main character. George Lopez, he's the main guy. You never see the mother as the major character, the bread winner of the family.” Miguel, a married man with young children, wanted to see Latino families on television with mother characters or female characters that have considerable influence in family and household decisions and female characters working outside the home. In another conversation, Andy said, male characters in Latino-themed programs

are “. . . always show[n] [. . . as . . .] the dominant . . . one . . . the bread winner, the one that says ‘it is going to be like this.’” He contrasted this idea with his observations of mother characters that were “always show[n] . . . as a housekeeper, as ‘I’ll tend to the kids.’”

Sitting around their kitchen table with her husband Henry and adult daughter Betty, Estelle said she wanted to see more depictions of working mothers, whose husband “pick[s] up the slack at home” by cooking, and by helping with the housework and the raising of their children. We all laughed when Estelle shifted the conversation to a story about her husband Henry putting their then teenage daughter’s bras in the dryer. “Once Lena said to me . . . ‘Mother don’t let dad do any washing for me.’ I said ‘*ay, mi hija* [my daughter] what happened?’ ‘He threw my bras in the dryer and all the wires came out.’” Estelle commented, “Yeah that happens . . . that’s reality.” Henry responded, “That happens? Not anymore . . . I wash everything else Erica.” After his wife Estelle and I interrupted him with our laughter, he said, “In fact, I’ve got a load in the dryer right now.” During my visits to Henry and Estelle’s home, I was always touched by Henry’s attentiveness to his wife Estelle. He would continually tell her how much he loved her and often asking her whether he could do things for her, the sort of things Estelle and Miguel said they wanted to see more often in depictions of Latino families. As I visited with Estelle and Henry and their daughter, I imagined the story they described as a scene in sitcom.

In this and in other conversations, viewers were clearly concerned about the lack of diverse portrayals. Several viewers said they grew up in single mother homes, rather single father homes. For this reason, they said that it would be realistic to depict Latino

families with mother characters that parent without the regular support of their children's father. In Armando's case, his father died when he was one year of age. Armando recalled the story of his first generation mother relocating their family away from the L.A. area, where he was born, to New Mexico "because she didn't want [her sons] to lose [their] heritage [or . . .] lose any sort of connection with Mexico." Considering his experiences, he repeatedly expressed how much he "love[d] the idea of portraying more single [Latina] mothers" in fictional television programs. "Having been raised by a single mother . . . my perception immediately is what I can relate to and how I grew up."

When I asked Armando what a fictional character like his mother would be like, he said "she would have 3 heads." After I laughed, he continued by saying that the character would be "Very logical, very no nonsense," a "Very grounded sort of person." Armando said he thought her way of parenting was "Still very unorthodox." As he explained it, "She would always tell me 'well, you know what you are doing.' And I was like 'ah, shit you are right.'" Armando said his mother had a way of letting him know that she knew what he was thinking or planning through the expressions on her face, so he often felt compelled to confess his thoughts to her. Considering the possibility of a single mother character similar to his mother, inspired a strong reaction from Armando, who appreciated his mother's "unorthodox" parenting style.

Even though Andy grew up in a two parent household and his mother was a homemaker, he associated the need to portray women in less traditional roles to one of his older sister's experiences as a divorced mother. In his opinion, portraying men as "the dominant one" is not as often a contemporary reality:

I think that they got to come out with more situations that are real...where you have the mom and the dad separate. You got the kids in the balance. Whether “Should I live with my dad?” “Should I live with my mom?” . . . the dad moves in with his girlfriend, so the kid can't go no more because [of] the girlfriend. Or maybe the mom has the boyfriend so the boyfriend doesn't want the kid because it is the dad's kid. You know, “I'm not going to tend to this kid. He's not my kid” I would like to see something like that, more real. . . . I bet you if something like that was to come out, if I was to make something like that I'd be a rich man [laughs]. Ratings would go sky high [laughs]. Because you would have everybody like “hey *mi hijo* [my son] that is true.”

Andy thought such a program might even inspire viewers to reconsider “getting married too young or having kids too young.” As the youngest child of first generation parents he described as loving, but “old fashioned,” Andy recognized the instructional value of fictional television programs. Considering his descriptions of his family interactions and television programs’ potential social value, it seemed fictional television programs might have been a source of information for Andy. At one point in our conversation, Andy said, “And there was certain aspects of my life where I wish somebody would tell me the things that I know now. I wish I would have somebody say like, ‘you know what Andy it is like this or like that.’” Andy believed his parent’s limited formal education and struggles to “work . . . and keep everything in order,” introduced certain communication barriers, even though there was no lack of love within his family.

Growing up, he said he felt “isolated,” because he believed his family members were disinterested in his opinions. Even though Andy and I had just met, he appreciated

how our discussion of television programs gave him an opportunity to share his opinions concerning topics he viewed as important:

As for me, I can't even have a discussion like I am doing it with you with them [his parents] because they would just get up and walk away. Why? Because one they are old. Two, they don't want to listen and, and, I don't think they would have the answers. I don't think they would know what to say. So, I kind a, I kind a, grew up isolated you know within my family. You know I have always had my parents living together and everybody coming to the house, but I have always felt isolated in my mind with my thinking. You know I can't discuss things like this with my brother. With my brother, he's living more the life that my dad is living, which is you know "which is work, raise my kids, maintain," and that's it . . .

There is not that much communication.

Andy's observations of his family interactions revealed another criticism a few viewers had concerning Latino family portrayals on television. Several viewers suggested the close Latino family was another stereotype. Consequently, a number of viewers wanted to see characters whose families are not "the stereotypical [close Latino] family," as Victor said.

Extreme Characters inspired Negative Reactions

With regard to their receptions of family portrayals, it is important to mention that extreme characters seemed to inspire some negative reactions. For instance, the character George Lopez's relationship with his mother character Benny was starkly different from the matriarchal character in *American Family* Berta's relationship with her children. Several viewers were troubled by the matriarchal character Benny Lopez, George's

mother in the series *George Lopez*. Benny's less than nurturing mothering tactics, alcoholic tendencies and sexual indiscretions, inspired some negative reactions from Latina viewers in particular. Disappointed by Benny's characterization, Eva complained:

She [Benny] is very sarcastic. And she doesn't know who his [George's] father is She's not portrayed as a loving, supportive, caring mother. I understand she has a, a back chat, a sarcastic, insensitive, a little hurtful That's not really positive.

Eva was also reacting to the negative connotation associated with the character's neglectful tendencies and alcoholism. With a similar complaint, Eva also mentioned Carlos Solis' mother character in *Desperate Housewives*. As she discussed these characters she was bothered that she was able to refer to more than one example of this harsh mother character type. Describing a scene between the Mexican American character Carlos Solis' and his mother character, played by guest star, Lupe Ontiveros, when Carlos asked his mother what to do when he suspected his wife Gabrielle (Gaby) was cheating with another man, Eva recalled:

He [Carlos] comes to her to uh, "What should I do? What should I do?" And he starts crying. What does she do? Slap him! "We don't have, we don't cry our problems. We, we do something about it." That was a little harsh. I didn't expect that from her [his mother] That was very surprising,

Consistently they seemed to prefer to view characters that were not cultural extremes, particularly in dramas. For instance, in a family focused drama, adult children might not share the intimate details of their lives, yet the reason for their lack of closeness does not need to be because their parents are abusive.

In light of the fact that research suggests viewers generally have negative evaluations of characters that behave in socially undesirable ways (Jose & Brewer, 1984; Klimmt, Hartman & Schramm, 2006; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Schmitt & Maes, 2006), it was not at all surprising that Latino viewers took issue with negatively-valued characterizations, especially when these types of characterizations inspire less empathy or other forms of identification (Raney, 2005; Schmitt & Maes, 2006). Why would viewers want to identify with characterizations they perceive as negative representations?

Cultural Believability more than Idealized Portrayals

Even though they were generally concerned about the lack of positive portrayals, most viewers said they were not entirely opposed to, for instance, characters having labor-intensive or service-oriented professions since “people are maids,” as Sam said. Not specifically referring to any particular character, and instead responding to Vanessa and Carla, who complained that Latina actresses “always play maids,” Sam explained, “They’re not making it up. Everything on TV, I believe that it has a truth. Sometimes they . . . go too far with it.” The idea that stereotypes “go too far” or that characterizations were too often “over the top” or “exaggerated” was reiterated again and again by all the viewers I spoke to in the course of my fieldwork. It was a word they commonly used to express a lack of believability. Yet, viewers clearly recognized some basis of realism in stereotypes and this certainly also informed their judgments regarding the use of stereotypes in fictional characterizations.

Even though Belinda was concerned “There is hardly ever a professional aspect to... [Latino] portrayals,” she said:

I think they should show both sides, not all of us, not every story has a positive either. And just like I want them to portray the positive, I don't mind the portrayal of the negativity either. It's just reality. But portray it correctly [laughs].

To further explain what she meant, she mentioned an episode of *Beverly Hills 90210*, a program that at the time aired as an off-network second-run syndicated cable program, after originally airing on the Fox network from 1990 to the year 2000. With a cast of all Anglo American high school characters, from mainly upper class families in Beverly Hills, the program rarely included non-Anglo secondary characters. However, Belinda described an episode that I had not seen, when "Brandon," one of the main characters, "starts liking this Latina girl that . . . transferred to the [Brandon's Beverly Hills] school" from an East L.A. high school. Belinda described the Latina character as "a good student," who transfers to the high school after she witnesses a gang related crime that made it dangerous for her to go to school where she lived. According to Belinda, Brandon's family, a family that was often depicted as a benevolent family, "allows her family to use their address," so she could enroll in Brandon's Beverly Hills high school. Belinda said that she thought of the character as "a more positive image" because the Latina character was such "a good student." Reiterating that she wanted "to see something else," other than the Latino character roles she typically saw in programs, she commented that she did not "expect" to see that sort of Latino role in the program.

Belinda continued by saying, "I think roles like that will give us a more positive image." At the same time, Belinda did not seem troubled by the *cholo* characters in the episode. Probably because as Belinda had previously said, "There's *cholos* . . . There's gangsters." So the fact the episode included *cholo* or gangster characters might not have

been an issue for Belinda, possibly because the *cholo* characters were extras in an episode that had a positive Latina character that was one of the focuses of the episode's narrative. Maybe, the contrast between the positive and negative characters in the episode "showed both sides" as she had previously suggested.

Though I did not clarify this with Belinda, I spoke with Miguel about whether in his opinion, ". . . having a Latino in a leading role offsets the decision to have Latinos as criminals?" In this instance, I was referring to *Law & Order*, a series of fictional police drama spin-offs that Miguel and other viewers frequently mentioned as series that they enjoy. Before I asked this question, Miguel had said that the Latino actor "Benjamin Bratt's" detective character Reynaldo "Rey" Curtis was a "really good" Latino characterization.

I was interested in knowing whether, ". . . having a Latino in a leading role offsets the decision to have Latinos suspect characters and/or criminals?" He responded to my question by saying, "I think so . . . in New York City [where the series are set] it is predominately Latino now." He implied it was only logical to sometimes have a Latino suspect or criminal characters when the series is set in a city that is comprised of "predominately Latino [persons]."

Similarly, Belinda reflected on another scene in the same *Beverly Hills 90210* episode, when for her, it was not just a matter of whether the characters' professions were stereotypical or "positive," since in her view, the narrative was realistic. As Belinda described it, the character Brandon takes the same Latina character to the diner where he works, The Peach Pit:

When he takes her to The Peach Pit, where he works . . . they show the two cooks, which they never showed before because the cook was always the, the Black guy. They show two, I don't know if they are cooks or dishwashers, but they are Mexican and they are looking at the girl like "you sell-out" because she is hanging out with all the little 90210 crowd. But, but, that is true in a lot of ways. Because you tend to be looked at like, "oh you think you are better than us because you're here with them and I am back here in the kitchen" . . . I don't think that was a negative portrayal, but it is more reality.

Belinda, whose first generation father is a cook in an L.A. restaurant, described this scene as a scenario "that is true in a lot of ways." Even though, as Belinda recounted, the characters working in the kitchen did not have speaking lines, Belinda inferred what they were thinking. When characters' use non-verbal communication to imply rather than state something explicitly, what is implied through their non-verbal communication is left for the viewer to determine. The writers might have had one idea in mind, while individual viewers might interpret a character's glances, facial expressions and body language differently. For instance, the writers for this episode might have scripted the kitchen employees' glances to suggest the characters were surprised to see this Latina character in Beverly Hills hanging out with upper class Anglo American high school students. Even so, viewers like Belinda interpret the kitchen employees' glances based on what they perceive as realistic, within the context of the scene. In this instance, the scene as Belinda interpreted it was fairly realistic; so she was not bothered that two of the three Latino characters in the scene worked in the kitchen of the dinner.

Whether viewers had a problem with “servant” characters was also a question of whether they perceived characterizations as “demeaning” as Miguel said. Andy, who was second generation Mexican American and at the time, a security guard, found servants and other hired help depictions objectionable because “you always see the minority doing something for someone [. . . yet. . .] you never see, you never actually see . . . them [Anglo American persons] doing things for [minority characters].” José said something similar:

It is always like some uppity rich person sitting in a pool giving orders to their servants. And that’s another thing . . . why do they always stereotype us as like servers or you know?

Viewers sometimes perceived servant roles as “stigmatized” and sometimes as “a slap in the face.” When viewers heard and observed people buying into the same stereotypes they saw on television, naturally these portrayals sometimes evoked strong reactions. This is not to say that viewers described working in service-oriented positions as dishonorable work, particularly when some of the viewers I interviewed, their parents, or grandparents worked in service-oriented professions. Instead, viewers protested people working in these positions portrayed as if there were no “honor” or “integrity” in working in service-oriented positions, as Estelle and Henry, a retired school secretary and retired school janitor said. They seemed to perceive characterizations as demeaning when they were only portrayed serving Anglos or other characters interacted with them in derogatory ways. Seemingly, Belinda was not offended by the “cooks or dishwasher” characters, as she put it, because she found the portrayal of their profession believable, and therefore, not objectionable. It was not surprising that she did not find the treatment

of the characters objectionable given the program's depiction of the diner as an escape from the ultra wealthy lifestyle of Beverly Hills to the quintessential working-class American gathering place. The characters' employer, Nat, was a reoccurring character, who had not lost touch with blue-collar upbringing, often conveyed through his kind acts. Nat was often shown in scenes as the character who was more in touch with middle and working class concerns than the wealthy crowd that patronized his Beverly Hills establishment.

Cultural Believability in the Details

Just as Belinda was attentive to the interaction between the diner employees and the Latina high school student, when viewers described believable characters and narratives, their comments often reflected their attention to specific cultural cues within narratives, non-Latino viewers might overlook. Using Weaver's (1986) cultural iceberg analogy, whereby he contends, the most meaningful aspects of culture are hidden under the surface, just as the largest part of an iceberg is under the water's surface (i.e. "beliefs, values and thought patterns [that are] implicitly learned") (p. 135), it seems logical that viewers might identify more with subtle cultural expressions.

Referring to the film *Mi Familia*, which later was produced as the television series *American Family*, Eva described what she found believable about the portrayal of a Mexican American family:

I like *Mi Familia*. That was an accurate portrayal, I think. That it was, you know at the very end when he says "it's a," and they kind of like sit down with their coffee, and you know their *panecito*, and he looks over and she looks over to him and, she says "it was a good day." And how, "We are so lucky. We are so

blessed.” And I thought yeah, you know, after everything that happened, they know life is perfect. No, no family is perfect. And for them to appreciate like all, you know, how for them to appreciate what they have, just even sitting down drinking, eating *panecito* every morning. I like that because like most of us have, like my dad has his coffee and his *panecito* in the morning, and my *abuelita* [grandmother], her coffee and it’s, that’s very traditional. Just taking that moment to sit down and have a cup of coffee. So, I like that.

Watching the characters drink a cup of coffee, eat a particular food and take a moment to reflect on their blessings rather than their hardships, evoked Eva’s feelings of appreciation for her own family and her culture. Even though it had been a number of years since she had watched the film, she remembered this simple non-pivotal scene in the film, which contributed to her believability assessment.

Similarly, when Tomás described why he thought the program *American Family* was realistic, he first mentioned that the program depicts Boyle Heights, the part of East L.A. where the character’s family home is located, and then talked about the characters relationships. Later, commenting on *American Family*, Tomás said “I think they did a great job with *American Family* on PBS. I think that was an outstanding show as far as giving people a piece of what the Hispanic culture is . . . when you see the neighbors, the *tías* and *dons* are from Central America. Because for me, I grew up in that.” Because he believed it is often misrepresented, he was quick to say, “Some people associate that title [*don*] with the mafia, but it is just something Latin cultures have that is a sign of respect. It is like saying ‘mister’ and ‘misses.’” These sorts of details, that someone might assume are minor aspects of characterizations that some viewers might even overlook, viewers

continually pointed out when discussing aspects of characterizations and their realism or believability as Latino television characterizations. This might have been partly due to their impression that most non-Latino viewers have a limited view of Latino cultures. At one point in our conversation, Tomás, who was a police officer said, “People will start believing it.”

Like Tomás, Claudia valued the believability of the program *American Family*’s characters and narratives. Claudia described how she believed it was realistic for “the father” character Jess Gonzalez to live in East L.A.” while one of his married daughters, Vangie, lived in Beverly Hills. Claudia compared these roles to the role of the unmarried daughter character, Nina, the lawyer and social activist of the family, who felt “obligated to stay” in her family home after her mother died, even though “she wanted to go,” as Claudia said. Claudia said she was so moved by the storyline of the mother’s death that it “made [her] cry a lot of times.” She explained, “It hit home a lot for me.” Beyond the “good acting” Claudia seemed to relate mainly to the experiences of the second generation Mexican American daughter characters, in particular the character Nina Gonzales, played by actress Constance Maria. However, Claudia, commenting on the youngest son Cisco Gonzales, she said “I didn’t like the younger brother on show. I thought he was a little too stoner, surfer, and realistically, I mean no.” Claudia did not think the character Cisco was believable as a second generation Mexican American character growing up in East L.A. The character did not come up in my discussions with anyone else. Other viewers might not have shared her opinion of Cisco.

I would describe Cisco’s character differently, not as a stoner, surfer character type. He seemed like a level-headed, intelligent, and family-oriented character. In the

series, Cisco seemed to embrace his Latino identity. During the first season, Cisco, an aspiring filmmaker, routinely captured his family's daily life on camera, hoping to turn it into a documentary. I found his character a deviation from many of the stereotypical character types viewers readily complained about during our conversations. This was particularly so in comparison to Cisco's older brother Esteban Gonzalez, a reformed ex-convict. Several viewers complained about Esteban's characterization, based on their opinions about the excessive use of criminal character types.

In general though, Claudia found the narrative's depictions of the characters' "everyday life" "realistic" because it "remind[ed]" her of her "childhood." Speaking about actress Constance Maria's character Nina, Claudia said:

I remember once she had this dress and she was embarrassed to wear the whole thing. I mean that didn't happen to me, but I could so relate to that because you don't want to be, I mean you love your mom, but [for] her to wear [laughs] the dorky dress. You want to be cool and hip and be with it. And she was ashamed . . . as an adult she saw the dress and it all came flooding back to her. No, very realistic, that was a great show.

Claudia related to the relationship the character Nina had with her mother. She could identify with wanting to look "cool and hip," while your first generation parents preferred that you wear something more conservative and traditionally Mexican. Her impression that the narratives and the characters and their relationships were "realistic" encouraged her identification with the characters and her enjoyment of the program's narratives.

Using Claudia's words, a television program "grab[s] you if it has got good characters, good dialogue . . . the basics. If it's good, it's good." Claudia said she

appreciated “story-based” characterizations, like the characterizations she described in *American Family*. With this same idea in mind, many of the female viewers I spoke with, wanted to see other narratives in which second generation females are pressured to stay close to their families, but they go off to college. Many of the female viewers I interviewed related to this pressure to stay close to their families. The 2002 HBO film, *Real Women Have Curves*, was a common topic in my conversations with viewers because the film in their opinions “accurately” portrayed the struggle a young woman graduating from high school faces when she wants to go to college away from home. Viewers suggested that they would like to see a television series that followed the character Ana’s life in college, away from her family in New York City. Several female viewers mentioned the program *A Different World*, an NBC series that aired from 1987-1993 that focused on the fictional lives of African American college students attending a historically black university. They indicated they would enjoy a Latina version of that program or a program with “a multicultural cast” that included Latina characters in a college setting. Relating this idea to the television series *American Family*, while a number of the characters in this series were college educated these experiences were not the focus of the program’s narratives.

Like Ana, the main character in *Real Women Have Curves*, Eva wanted to go to college in New York City. Eva described the film as an “accurate” portrayal; and said she identified with a similar narrative in the film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. In this film a female protagonist felt pressured to continue to work in her family’s restaurant rather than pursue a college degree or experience life independent of her large extended Greek family:

Well, like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* she's, she was older, but she went back to school. She went back to college and then she kind of grew from there. When you are at home, like our culture [is] kind of like [that . . .] at East L.A. College, you know before transferring over to CAL State, we went into this meeting and this man was there, a little angry, but kind of like in our face to [laughs] saying "Why don't you girls go out. You know go to another [city]. Go and experience and this and that." And "All the other students do it, but you Latinas you stay right here, *aquí, aquí*, right here." And we are thinking he's saying "all these other kids are experiencing other things." And I said, "Are you from our culture? Do you know that [we both laugh] it's going to take a lot to let." Because you know they, uh, worry, you know the fathers. The families are like "You are not going to go to San Francisco." You know that's what happened to me. I wanted to go to New York, and go to FITM and there's no way, as, as an 18 year old, they were going to let me go off.

Georgina, Eva's friend related this film to a similar experience of wishing to attend a college outside of L.A., though she eventually did with the support of her family.

Responding to Eva's comment and revealing generational differences, Georgina said:

See that was part of the thing with us. It was like, not that, not that you want to throw it in their face but, like our parents came to another country, not another state, not another city [I laugh], they moved to a whole other country. And I told my mom, I told my parents, I'm like "um, you left your country. You left, I mean not to throw it in your face, but you left your mom and you are the only daughter." And my mom wasn't so much against it as they were like really going

to miss [me] because I was the last one and the youngest. It was like their last little thing of being parents. And they had to let go of that. And literally when they dropped me off in San Francisco they were crying. Like they drove me up there and my sister was like “look, it’s the best thing for her to go off and do her thing. She can’t live at home forever. And if she doesn’t do it now, now is the perfect time for her to do that kind of a leap because it’s, she’s going on to college. If she does it later, she doesn’t experience college fully,” you know?

Our conversation about believable fictional characters sitting at a picnic table enjoying some fair food during an outdoor art and craft show prompted a discussion about personal experiences. Responding to Georgina, Eva again conveyed the perception that non-Latinos might not understand this pressure to live close to home. Even though she identified with the main Greek American protagonist, Eva said, “But, they don’t understand that. Because a lot of like Latino families, I’m sorry but they just don’t know that.” Both Eva and Georgina found this experience “frustrating” though they accepted it as a part of their culture, and valued seeing characters that depicted similar experiences. In fact, these characters prompted discussions about a cultural issue they perceived as meaningful. At the same time, they found these television and film characters entertaining, even years later.

The Dicey Nature of Humor

On the one hand, the viewers in this study were strongly opposed to “exaggerated” characters, particularly when the characterizations were reproductions of the roles Latinos have historically played in English-language television. On the other hand, they tended to have different reactions to comedic exaggerations. A key issue that

came out of my discussions with the viewers was whether or not there are fictional scenarios when ethnic stereotypes were appropriate or even enjoyable. Because viewers were very familiar with genres and conventional genre practices they tended to discuss fictional scenarios with the genre of the program in mind. Whether it is part of a comedian's stand-up act or it is a part of a fictional television narrative, comedy tends to rely on socially-constructed generalizations or stereotypes. In fact, generalizations and stereotypes are such standard fare in sketch comedy programs, viewers expect to see stereotypes used in these narratives. However, viewers' positive or negative impressions of comedic characterizations depended upon whether ethnic depictions, intended to be humorous, include a twist that communicated the ridiculousness of the stereotype or whether the narrative affirmed stereotypes in a demeaning or derogatory way.

Apte (1987) argues that, "ethnic humor in American society is under greater constraints than at any time in the past," in part because minorities are becoming increasingly more vocal about their dissatisfaction with ethnic representations (p.27). Humor is often thought of as highly political. The freedom to joke about any given topic is frequently connected to one's "freedom of speech." And yet, ethnic identity is also something that is politically charged in the U.S. This is to the extent that some argue ethnic humor is no longer acceptable in any social forum, not in interpersonal social contexts and certainly, not in any larger mass media forum, such as television (Apte, 1987). This is particularly so when the voice behind the humor is not a member of the ethnic group and the humor is perceived as demeaning.

While it may be the writers of the narratives intention to displace a stereotype even if it is not overtly communicated, the producers of the message run the risk of

having the audience misinterpret their intentions. Viewers sometimes have alternative interpretations other than writers' preferred readings (Livingstone, 1990). Given the limited range of depictions of Latinos in English-language television, any humorous narrative with a Latino character has to be considered in the context of whether it reinforces or challenges common stereotypes. Distinguishing between what some viewed as an "intelligent use of stereotypes" versus a "demeaning" use of stereotypes presupposed that humor was coded with messages that reflected various realities, particularly for those who are the subject of the humor. Because the sorts of humor used in television programs often include a lot of implied ideas, rather than always overtly stated assumptions, the motivation behind the characterizations is often left for viewers to interpret (Apte, 1987).

Intent behind the Humor

Viewers were quite clear about their enjoyment of comedy, and appreciated the way comedies play around with stereotypes that might offend viewers. With this in mind, Tomás commented, "if you really look at it we make fun of our own culture too . . . so does every other culture." Tomás felt viewers should not "get insulted at every little thing that is said because . . . there is some truth to it." He clarified his point by saying, "As long as they are not trying to offend someone or lessen them it shouldn't really be a problem." When I asked Tomás, "When does humor become demeaning?" He responded, "If that is your intent. It is very simple. When that is your intent. If you intend to lessen someone, then that is when it becomes offensive."

Commenting on the Salvadorian maid character in the program *Will & Grace*, Rosario, a character frequently belittled by Karen, her wealthy Anglo American employer, Edberto talked about what it was like to view these sorts of characterizations:

If that was my mom . . . because there are a lot of Mexican women that do work in Beverly Hills . . . okay, why would you want to come home and turn on the channel and look at some rich lady make fun of someone that is supposed to be her?

Certainly, Edberto believed the producers and writers for *Will & Grace* “go too far,” as Sam suggested they sometimes do. Edberto, who grew up learning about how much his first generation parent’s value “hard work,” was troubled that a Latino character was belittled because of her profession. Edberto mentioned that he had a similar discussion with his sister. He talked a lot about power and the fact that some Mexican immigrants are taken advantage of by Anglo employers, particularly when they are undocumented workers¹¹ like Rosario. In his opinion, the character Rosario was an example of a Latino character “dehumanized” by a “person” with “power,” her employer Karen. Edberto also talked about how he interpreted the message behind the characterization:

They’re basically keeping, like continuing to oppress Mexicans. Because all they’re doing is they’re just telling the masses “This is what a Mexican woman is like. She enjoys your abuse. You know and she would rather not be deported and she’d rather stay here and be abused by you . . . and by the way she might even like it in some twisted way.”

¹¹ Soon after the introduction of the Rosario maid character, the character Karen forces Rosario to marry her gay Anglo American friend Jack so that Rosario can be a permanent U.S. resident and avoid deportation.

Based on his responses, it was clear that Edberto believed there were people who experience unreasonable requests and “abuse,” working as maids. Vanessa seemed to agree with Edberto that there are some elements of realism in Karen’s treatment of her maid, Rosario. “I mean it’s, it’s realistic for the fact that in real life people do, do that. You know you are not top notch.” The fact that Rosario was “not top notch” was in her opinion, “actually very representative. Not everybody will go ahead and treat their maid [as an] equal.” While viewers such as Edberto and Vanessa believed people who work as maids were “treated” poorly “at times,” whether they had a negative assessment of the Rosario depiction, for instance, depended on whether again, they thought the depiction was demeaning? Vanessa, who repeatedly said she was tired of maid characters, seemed to agree that characterization was not as clearly demeaning as “some might think, if they don’t regularly watch the show.” Edberto, however, was very familiar with *Will & Grace* and the Rosario character, and he still strongly objected to the depiction.

While Edberto clearly believed the depiction was negative, other viewers had a slightly different interpretation of the character because they believed Rosario “stands up to” Karen, as Georgina said. Referring to this as a characterization twist that made Rosario “not the typical maid” character, was Georgina’s view. With a completely different take on the Rosario character, Georgina suggested:

Even though it is a stereotype, she [Rosario] is very clever. Because she just, she stands up to her [Karen] all the time. And they argue all the time on an equal level. And I think that is cool about that character . . . because . . . she is not stupid even though what’s her face [Karen] tries to treat her like “you are my maid shut up.” In the end, she [Karen] is always like “you are my best friend.” She [Karen]

cries with [Rosario] and stuff . . . to me it is kind of like breaking through that . . . she is totally rich and that is her maid, but on another level that woman is also the stereotype of those rich women that are all so lonely and so into themselves that they haven't taken the time to develop as people.

In this instance, Georgina's opinion of Rosario's power to respond to Karen's abuse, the complexity of the characters' relationship, and her observation that Karen was a stereotypical Anglo American socialite influenced her interpretation of the characterization. For Georgina, Rosario was not the typical maid character because "she stands up to" Karen. In her opinion, Rosario and Karen "argue all the time on an equal level." Their different interpretations of Rosario's power prompted Edberto, Vanessa and Georgina to have different reactions to the characterization.

It was important for Edberto, Georgina and other viewers to see Latino characters in roles or positions where they were not degraded because of their profession or Latino identity, as I explained in previous sections of this chapter. In their opinions, it was easier to objectify characters that lack the power to defend themselves or characters that were unknowingly the butt of a joke because they lack the intelligence or cultural knowledge to understand the intention of the humor. Whether or not viewers believed characterizations were acceptable, depended to a certain extent on their observation of a character's power in the context of the program's cast or within the context of a particular scene. Georgina referred to the character Rosario as "very clever." This idea of a character's "intelligence" or "power" was reiterated by a number of viewers that were concerned about the messages explicitly or inexplicitly communicated in ethnic characterizations.

Social-Reality Commentary

Male viewers seemed to generally enjoy what Victor described as “characters that are cynical or stereotypical,” when characters “do the opposite” of what’s expected given the stereotype. Humor typically relies on a certain degree of unpredictability. Viewers are supposed to occasionally have a shocked reaction to comedic dialogues (Berger, 1997). This unpredictability accompanied by believable elements can contribute to viewer involvement and identification with characters (Hall, 2006).

Whether or not humor was acceptable also depended on whether the presentation of stereotypes included a “message” that disavowed a stereotype or whether the humor further reinforced ethnic stereotypes. Again though, it was a question of the ways the stereotype was used in the characterization and whether viewers were exhausted by the idea of seeing stereotypical characterizations, whether positive or negative. Tomás admitted some comedians, such as Latino comedian, Carlos Mencia, “walk the line,” between what is offensive and not offensive. Tomás explained, speaking about comedy in general, “humor is something that we understand and recognize, said a certain way. Just like a joke said seriously is just a statement, but a joke said in a humorous way becomes a joke. It’s all in how you say it.” Referring to Mencia’s Comedy Central program *Mind of Mencia*, he continued and said, “If people really listen to it they won’t get offended.”

Comedians, such as Mencia, attempt to represent working class persons who lack certain privileges, and therefore, seek to expose social institutions to their critical interpretations. A skillful comedian can evoke humorous responses to serious and pointed social observations, leaving even their audiences surprised that they are laughing at lines that could be interpreted as offensive or at the very least objectionable. Their knack for

blurring the line between the serious and the unserious allows for a subjective interpretation of their humor. Members of their audience are left to decide whether to excuse their offenses (Berger, 1997). If, for instance, a comedian's humor has some social relevance, as Tomás suggested, viewers might find it acceptable.

In one skit, as Tomás described it, Mencia "mention[ed] that he didn't want to be seen as Middle Eastern when he went to the airport since some people believe "Middle Easterners [. . . might belong to. . .] some sort of terrorist group." According to Tomás, Mencia "Made a joke about talking 'in Spanish and doing the Mexican¹² thing', so [other people would] know he is Hispanic." In L.A., Latino persons are sometimes mistaken for Middle Eastern persons, and vice versa. Tomás explained, "When you go to the airport you don't want to be seen as Middle Eastern. So you will do what you have to let people know in some way you are Hispanic. A lot of people do that." For Tomás, since Mencia was "not saying something that isn't true. And he is not really exaggerating," and instead just "telling you what's out there," Mencia's humor "shouldn't be offensive to anyone."

Other viewers, particularly male viewers, also mentioned *Mind of Mencia*. Since the program premiered on the Comedy Central network during the time of my fieldwork in the summer of 2005, the series was heavily promoted in the Los Angeles area. The viewers I spoke with perceived Carlos Mencia's sketch comedy routines as comedy that pushes the limits of what was acceptable humor, in the way Mencia used "generalizations," as Armando said. Andy even referred to Mencia as "a Hispanic

¹² Mencia is a native Honduran. His comment is interesting because he is discussing performing a Mexican identity. In Los Angeles, people are more likely to assume someone is Mexican than Honduran because of the size of the Mexican American population.

Howard Stern,” who “is going to be killed or beat up” for offending viewers of his program.

Armando described *Mind of Mencia* as the type of comedy “that tries to shatter political correctness.” As Armando said, Mencia’s attempt to push the boundaries of political correctness was part of his appeal, as comedians such as Mencia inspire the “That is true, but I can’t believe he/she said that” reaction from their viewers. With comedy, viewers indicated that they expect to see more “exaggeration” or “generalizations” than in dramas, though they expressed concerns about when humorous exaggerations and generalizations go too far.

Armando said when he watches *Mind of Mencia*, “You almost feel guilty laughing.” Although, Armando said, “He does not always seem to have his facts right,” referring to Mencia’s use of “generalizations” or “stereotypes,” he said in the program, “He’ll do the stereotype and there’s a punch line and then there might be a message later on.” Armando said, “On, for example, the first show, I think it was the first show, he was talking about . . . adopting and he is saying . . . ‘Why are you going off to China to adopt some Chinese baby where we have perfectly good merchandise here at home?’” According to Armando, Mencia’s sketch routine was a commentary on Anglo Americans preferring to adopt Chinese children rather than Latino and non-Latino African American children. Intentionally, Mencia played around with the irony of “Buy American” slogans, yet the same consumer market might prefer to adopt a Chinese infant instead of a non-Anglo American child.

Though there seemed to be a definite sub-context to this narrative, Armando said he believed the ethnic humor in *Mind of Mencia* was “based on logic;” therefore,

Armando interpreted it as “the type of humor that you would have to be “in a certain know to understand.” In the previous example, Armando suggested, even though Mencia presented stereotypes, Mencia intended to reveal the irony of adoption decisions using the same patriotic “logic” people may use in other situations. In this example, Mencia’s humor involved associating ideas viewers might not typically perceive as interrelated. However, viewers did not always interpret such messages positively. Moreover, the dialogue could offend persons who adopt babies overseas. Although, this was seemingly not Mencia or Armando’s concern because they assumed the practice was motivated by discriminatory beliefs. Humor can provide comic relief when viewers are highly involved in programs that include topics that elicit strong reactions (e.g. fear, anger, disgust). Viewers sometimes responded positively to the interruption of humor in a narrative conveying “a serious social problem,” such as discrimination, provided they interpreted the humor as believable and appropriate to the narrative (Hall, 2006, p. 204).

Genre Matters

Even though it is a film example, a number of the viewers mentioned the film *A Day Without A Mexican* as an example of a narrative with a simplistic logical message that for viewers did not accomplish its intent. The film, a satirical drama was co-written and directed by Sergio Arau, a Mexican filmmaker. Presumably, Arau intended to bring to light the importance of Latinos, namely Mexican Americans to California’s economy and labor force through a somewhat ironic scenario in which all the Latinos in California suddenly disappear after a mysterious cloud looms over the state. While viewers had a number of issues with the film’s narrative and use of stereotypes, viewers found the

film's delivery of the message insulting because the film lacked the sort of realism that would make the events believable.

Andy became so frustrated with the film that he walked out of the theater before it ended. In Andy's opinion, the film "was a slap in the face because they show these White people or whatever people in the show [as] useless." For Andy the film's message crossed the line into the realm of the unbelievable when it clearly depicted Anglo American characters as persons who "didn't know how to work a vacuum," "use a blender" or "answer a door," without the assistance of their Mexican hired help. When I asked Andy whether the message of the film could have been more effectively conveyed, he said:

I wouldn't have done it like that. I would have done it more like a comedy. More like a, a make you laugh, but at the same time "Damn I am laughing at this but it is true. You know that is why I am laughing at it." And they made it more like an "ah, ha, ha, oh yeah Mexicans they are gardeners." "Oh, yeah, yeah, they are the trash guys."

Here, again, Andy, as did other viewers, expressed the need for fictional characterizations to have realistic messages or ideas that resonate with viewers. Andy's response to the film and suggestion that the film's message would have been less "insulting" if it were a comedy was also indicative of how viewers' reactions differed depending on the genre and the extent of the exaggerations in the characterizations. Obviously, Andy believed these sorts of exaggerations were more appropriate in a comedy than in a drama, even if both narratives were satirical.

Later in our conversation, Andy continued to explain that when the intent was to entertain viewers, sensitive topics can sometimes be masked in humorous narratives. Using George's mother, the character Benny Lopez's alcoholism in the program in program *George Lopez* as an example, Andy explained, "He gets away with [depicting her as an alcoholic] because he makes it funny." Quoting George Lopez's character, speaking to Benny his mother about her neglect, Andy said, "When I was a little kid I used to wear *huaraches* [Mexican sandals] to school and I would be there all day and you would never pick me up because you were too drunk to go get me." Although Andy found this dialogue humorous, he said that he would not want to see the same narrative in a drama. However, I as I previously mentioned in the section extreme character inspired negative reactions, several female viewers were troubled by Benny's depiction as a harsh and less than attentive mother character. These different interpretations again express the subjectivity of viewers' receptions of comedic characters.

Creative Control over Comedic Material

Whether Latino persons have some creative control over the content was also a consideration for viewers. Understanding the humor of any particular culture requires having an understanding of the inner workings of the culture because humor both relies on and is interpreted through culture. Cultural norms and values often dictate the boundaries of humor. Because culture is not static, we know that the social boundaries of humor can also be dynamic. Stand-up comedians and other public personalities at times attempt to push these boundaries in different ways that either receives a warm or cold reception from their audiences. After negatively evaluating the film *A Day Without A Mexican*, Andy said "It's a shame . . . the director was Chicano." Andy assumed Arau

cared “more about what the press would say and the tabloids” than whether the message of the film was convincing or believable.

Using the same line of thinking, viewers connected the identity of the characters or television personalities making humorous statements or performing the actions to whether there was an intention to offend or degrade a Latino character or person. Speaking about the program *George Lopez*, Carla and Sam, two second generation Salvadorian American college students, discussed their cultural insider/outsider concerns with regard to George Lopez the actor/comedian’s role in the development of the program’s narratives. Carla began this conversation by saying, “George Lopez he made fun of us...things that we do,” after Sam indicated that he enjoyed watching *George Lopez*. Responding before she finished her statement and distinguishing himself from George Lopez, who is Mexican American, Sam said “But, he makes fun of his own people.” Laughing and agreeing that as Sam said, “a lot of stuff [in the program], it’s true,” Carla said:

I like it. I know. I like it [laughs]. I like it But, I get it. I get it. Like I don’t get offended because I know it’s true. . . . But, see when somebody else, people that’s not from you’re uh, race, you do feel offended. You’re like “oh, no, you don’t know.”

Sam agreed, and referring to himself as both a cultural insider because he shares a Latino identity with Lopez and as a cultural outsider because he is not Mexican American, said “Well, he’s part of the culture. So I guess he knows, he knows, where we come from, basically.”

Expressing the same idea in another conversation, Michael, a Mexican American viewer said “George Lopez is hilarious. He’s hilarious. He’s doing exaggerated too. It’s not to exact point. But, he knows what’s going on.” When I questioned Michael about what he meant when he said, referring to George Lopez, “he knows what is going on.” Earlier in our conversation he had complained about exaggerated characterizations. When referring to George Lopez, the program creator/actor/executive producer of the program he contended, “It’s different because it’s coming from a Latino:”

He’s Hispanic . . . so he can get away with it . . . he could do that . . . A lot of people . . . are people that went to school of for acting and now they are up there. They get a role as something that they don’t really know about . . . someone else doing it I would be mad. I mean someone like, like one of my friends do it would be different, but if someone else is doing it like, I get kind of mad.

For Michael, whether or not the character or actor’s performance was demeaning, depended to a certain extent on whether the actor or the character’s creator was knowledgeable about the culture or identity they were portraying. This was a predictable viewer reaction when the issue was the use of stereotypes. Relating it back to the “intent to offend or lessen someone” through the characterization, as Michael indicated, viewers were more likely to believe persons who were knowledgeable about Latino cultures were not intentionally trying to degrade Latino persons in characterizations. This of course, did not entirely explain viewers’ reactions to stereotypes in fictional characterizations.

Using the programs *George Lopez* and *Mind of Mencia* as examples, viewers seemed to expect and prefer that comedic characters have a bit of an edge. In other words, something about their characterizations that lets characters say things and act in a

way that viewers might have perceived as socially inappropriate. This is not to say that viewers did not want Latino characters to be one of the “good characters.” As Armando explained characters that have a bit of an edge were more realistic and sometimes even more enjoyable. He described the character George Lopez, as “fairly well-rounded . . . as . . . a role model, [and as] a good Latino representation . . . because there is still that slight outlaw twist to him.” He explained what he meant by “slight outlaw twist” when he continued and said, “He wants to get the best price for some construction and he is going to pay the guys with a case and half of beer . . . And then there’s of course the logic that kicks in of doing the right thing and that sort of thing.” As Armando explained it, comedic characters might need to make some forgivable mistakes because it adds to the humor and believability of their characterization. For Armando, comedic characters that are too idealistic are not as enjoyable as comedic characters with “some rough edges,” a perception consistent with comedy writers’ assumptions concerning the sort of characterizations audiences find humorous. Television writers believe humorous characters need to have some unruly, illogical or politically incorrect tendencies, in order for their audiences to find them humorous, though as some indicated, when the social boundaries of morality and decency are pushed too far, characterizations can evoke unintended negative reactions (Cook, 2007; Rannow, 1999; Smith, 1999).

Chapter Summary

When viewers compared the Latino portrayals they see on television to themselves and other Latino persons, they indicated that most Latino characterizations did not reflect how they experience their ethnic identity. Viewers frequently described Latino fictional characters as characters that reinforce stereotypes. Stereotypes, they

defined as common ideas “that everyone already knows” as Georgina said, and as overgeneralizations associated with Latino identities in real-world situations. They contended stereotypical characterizations typically over exaggerate ideas and associate these ideas with Latino identities, in a way that stigmatizes the identities associated with the stereotype. Personal encounters with these stereotypes contributed to viewers’ concerns about television portrayals.

Given these experiences, viewers were generally were not in favor of characterizations presenting stereotypes as if they are taken-for-granted assumptions, rather than generalizations that might be true for some people. In this regard, viewers recognized how stereotypes reflect some degree of realism. Though they suggested the stereotypes they often observed in Latino characterizations lacked the sort of believability that would have inspired stronger forms of identification. On these points, viewers adamantly agreed.

For these reasons, viewers often juxtaposed their perceptions of stereotypes to a need to diversify characterizations by countering stereotypical portrayals with different character types in diverse settings, more reflective of Latino experiences not evident in many characterizations. For some viewers, if there were a more diversified array of characters on television, they would not have had as negative of a reaction to some characterizations. At the same time, their opinions differed somewhat depending on their interpretations of characterizations and sometimes depended on whether the program was a comedy or a drama. The genre of programs communicated something to them about the tone and intention to the messages they believed characterizations communicated to their audiences.

Their comments about the cultural exaggerations they observed in characterizations offered further insight regarding the relevance of the cultural information encoded in characterizations. In terms of viewers' receptions of these characters, a number of considerations were evident, namely, their perceptions of their cultural identity and their perceptions about how non-Latinos perceive their ethnic identity. As I discussed in the previous chapter, viewers believed Anglo producers, writers and actors generally lack knowledge about meaningful aspects of Latino cultures. Their observations and reactions to the characterizations they saw on television were particularly important because they offered insights regarding their beliefs about the ways professionals in the industry should communicate characters' Latino identities, a main interest of this research that I discuss further in Chapter 5 Character Development.

CHAPTER 5: CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Much of the discussion in the previous fieldwork chapters reveals second and later generation Latino viewers' negative reactions to television industry production decisions and to the Latino characterizations derived from these decisions. Based on these reactions, I was interested in exploring "How viewers believed ethnic identity should be communicated in Latino fictional characterizations?" This chapter focuses on their responses to this question.

This question typically required more prompting than others. In some cases, individuals raised a concern and then followed this concern with an alternative way to express the ethnic identity of the character. More often though, I had to directly ask viewers questions such as: "If you were making the decisions, how would you communicate to the audience the character is a Latino character?" I also approached this question by asking viewers to think about non-Latino characters and (whether or) how they might change the character if they were a Latino character.

There were some common ideas about how ethnic identity should be communicated. These suggestions revealed more about their perceptions of their ethnic identity. Often times, their suggestions would not require major changes in characterizations. Instead, their suggestions would involve an awareness of second and later generation persons' identity and language experiences, evident in several existing programs, mentioned in this chapter.

This chapter begins with a discussion pertaining to portraying the multicultural identities viewers described, and then it details viewers' recommendations regarding how to convey ethnicity through cultural cues. The final section of the chapter focuses on one

of the dominant recommendations that emerged in my conversations with viewers, using Spanish to convey identity.

Portraying Multicultural American Identities

First generation immigrants and their children, as well as subsequent generations, represent one out of every five Americans. In many of these households, Spanish is the primary spoken language. Many of their parents have not applied for citizenship. Of those that have applied for or obtained citizenship, more individuals are maintaining dual citizenships, which are shaping the identities of their children, who are also more likely to accept bicultural or multicultural identities in the U.S. (Jacoby, 2004). In keeping with this trend, the viewers I interviewed consistently asserted their multicultural identities, as Americans, both socially and culturally connected to their Mexican or Salvadorian heritage. Explaining what she meant when she referred to Latina characters, Elizabeth said, “When I say Latina, I mean people who are strongly rooted in their cultural identity, yet they are very American. That is what we are. We are both.” Elizabeth wanted characters to have an obvious pride in their heritage, yet have a U.S. American identity.

It was interesting to hear first generation Latinos occasionally discuss second and later generation persons as “more [U.S.] American.” As if to say it was surprising that second generation persons were more American than their parents. Persons born in the United States may not share the same connection to Mexico or El Salvador as their first generation parents, grandparents or even great grandparents. Estelle described herself as an “American of Mexican descent.” While she had a particular familiarity and connection to Mexico because her parents were born in Mexico, in every sense of the word, she was “American.”

Several viewers talked about traveling to Mexico and about their awareness they were a foreigner in their parent's home country. Georgina, for instance, who was bilingual, struggled with the differences between Mexican and Mexican American Spanish dialects, during one of her trips to Mexico:

I mean you don't address them in a familiar tone you address them in a formal tone. And, so [it is] those kind of things, where it is hard sometimes because you don't always know what to do. And that kind of thing I would notice that a lot of people would kind of give me a dirty looks. And I was like I don't know I'm not from here you know? You know in a restaurant where you can't always explain to people. I'm like "Oh, I don't know." I'm like "Oh, I can speak all this to you, but I don't know I am sorry. And a lot of American things that are cultural that aren't offensive here are offensive there. And that is a really hard."

Her comments reflected some degree of social apprehension, anxiety and possibly cultural shock. Despite what she learned about Mexican culture while growing up in a home with Mexican parents, she was aware that she was unfamiliar with many Mexican cultural customs.

Georgina continued by explaining that her mother sometimes found it difficult to understand certain cultural practices in the U.S., though she had lived in California for over thirty years. These experiential differences informed their receptions of television characters. Although, at the time, there were numerous depictions of foreign-born Latinos in Spanish-language and even a few in English-language television programs, there were far fewer depictions of second and later generation persons that reflect these experiential differences.

In a separate conversation, Estelle alluded to this when explaining the kind of Latino characters she wanted to see on television:

Yeah, yeah, I would like to see more of that and not . . . you know, not a stereotypical Mexican or one that has a *bigote* [mustache] down to here. You know where you picture *el ranchero* [rancher] or whatever and I know they are there also. But, you know a nice clean cut um, lawyer you know doing his part or his hair is a little bit long, but then he will throw a word in Spanish and you know maybe turn to his client and say “*Que no?*” “*Que quieres*” or “What do you think?” To be able to handle I think both cultures. If I want to eat a burrito, I’ll eat a burrito. If I want to have filet mignon, I’ll have a filet. You know and yet I’m a Mexican. I’m an American of Mexican descent. And that’s what I would like to see portrayed.

Estelle related characters “[being] able to handle . . . both cultures,” to being bilingual and eating particular foods, ideas she viewed as clear expressions of her culture.

However, the character actors or cultural cues she recommended would not be paramount to the development of a program’s narrative.

Quite often when portraying ethnic minorities on television, character creators and writers either overemphasized or ignored ethnic differences, with some notable exceptions. However, in many narratives, ethnic identity was either the central defining focus of a program’s characters or ethnic identity never factors into characters’ interactions or experiences (Gray, 2001). Either practice is an oversimplification of multicultural experiences.

At one point in our conversation, Miguel complained, “When you see Latinos they are usually very ethnic. . . . They over exaggerate it.” Miguel described culture as something “you live and breathe,” not something that one is always consciously contemplating. With a similar observation, Elena commented, “In high school most of my friends’ parents were from Mexico and their children were very American. And their parents were very traditional. The family does not concentrate on being Mexican.” By describing culture in this way Miguel and Elena were not minimizing its importance; instead, they asserted that cultures are experiential and evident in the subtle nuances of one’s behaviors or beliefs.

Eva mentioned the sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond* as one the “more realistic [programs on] TV.” What was interesting was the way the program depicted an Italian American family, without emphasizing their ethnic identity as a central focus of the characters’ lives. The sitcom, which ended production after airing for nine-seasons on CBS in 2005, was loosely based on the life of the series creator and star, Italian actor/comedian Ray Romano, who performed as the character Ray Barone in the sitcom. The main setting for the program was Ray’s home, which he shared with his wife Debra (performed by actress Claudia Heaton) and their three small children. The other characters in the cast were members of Ray’s fictional close-knit family, Ray’s brother character Robert, performed by actor Brad Garrett, his mother Marie, played by actress Doris Roberts, and his father character Victor, performed by the late actor Peter Boyle.

When Eva explained why she believed the sitcom family was similar to real-world families she said, “The house [is messy] and they’re [Ray and Debra], she’s [Debra’s] struggling, [their] frustration [with each other and life], that would be realistic,

I can see that. Yeah, that could be a Latino family, with the parents.” Ray’s parent characters, Marie and Victor lived across the street from Ray and his wife Debra. Ray’s mother character in particular had an unabashed interest in her adult children’s lives and decisions, frequently offering her advice, even when her opinions were not welcomed by her children or their spouses. While this character tension inspired some humorous interactions, Eva found the living environments, the characters’ emotions and interactions believable. Meghan, an Italian American friend, who was not a part of this field study, also described the series as a believable portrayal of an Italian family, “It is really subtle. But, when you watch the program, you go, ‘Yeah, that’s my family in a lot of ways [laughs].’”

Viewers believed the characters had believable interactions and emotions, yet the production team conveyed the characters’ Italian identities in a restrained manner. The believability of these features of the narrative and their subtleness allowed for cross-cultural identification with characters. Eva was able to see some similarities between the fictional Barone family and Latino families. Likewise, my African American brother-in-law enjoyed re-watching episodes and repeating the characters lines while he recounted similarities between the characters and his family. In particular, the mother character, Doris, reminded him of his late mother. His recognition of similarities between a character such as Doris and real-life persons motivated his involvement in the program’s narratives. Although the cultural cues were subtle, they were able to identify with the characters cross-culturally, while still recognizing the fictional family’s Italian American identity.

Conveying Ethnicity through Cultural Cues

In the following pages, I present more details about the specific suggestions that emerged out of my discussions with Latino viewers concerning physical appearances, names and cultural cues within program settings. These recommendations further supported their consensus that programs could portray Latino identities in believable, yet subtle ways, not apparent in some of the character examples presented in the previous chapters. At the same time, it was important to explore identity considerations that might influence viewers' receptions and noteworthy examples that demonstrate the feasibility of using these cultural cues in characterizations.

Physical Appearances

As I indicated in Chapter 3 Behind the Scenes, viewers wanted to see the physical diversity of Latino populations depicted on television, ranging from blond and blue-eyed persons to those with more indigenous and African phenotypes. Even though physical appearance in some cases might seem like the easiest way to communicate the ethnic identity of characters, the diversity of Latino persons' physical appearances complicates this assumption.

At times, people questioned or guessed as to whether characters and actors were Latino, suggesting viewers considered other cultural identifiers when deciding whether a character was Latino. However, this also suggested physical appearances alone might not communicate characters' ethnic identities, particularly when Latino actors sometimes played non-Latino roles, as several viewers explained. Miguel, for instance, enjoyed the program *Scrubs*, a sitcom about the comedic antics of a fictional hospital staff. Miguel described the program as "a good show," then added, referring to Nurse Carla Espinosa,

performed by Judy Reyes, and Dr. Christopher Turk, played by actor Donald Faison, “The head nurse is Puerto Rican and her husband is a Puerto Rican actor, but he plays an African American surgeon.”

I was not able to confirm whether Miguel’s assumption was correct; however, Faison could have Latino ancestry. Even though Miguel was able to accept Faison as a Puerto Rican actor, casting professionals rarely cast persons with African phenotypes as Latino characters. Although there are many persons of African descent who are Latino, some casting professionals might have particular schemas that interfere with them considering an actor such as Faison, Latino, even though he is performing a role, rather than his ethnic identity. Seemingly, Reagan Gomez-Preston, an actress of Puerto Rican descent, I described in Chapter 3 as part of the series *Love Inc.*, was also cast for African American roles and not Latina roles because of her physical appearance.

Likewise, even when viewers were aware the characterization was a performance of a Latino identity, actors’ physical appearances did not necessarily communicate a particular origin nationality. Generally, a character’s physical characteristics are dependent upon the physical characteristics of the actor cast to play the role. Although, a character’s appearance can be altered with make-up and costume decisions, rarely are an actor’s physical features altered for a television role. Although Miguel described the Latina character in *Scrubs* as “Puerto Rican,” in an online article, actress Judy Reyes, was quoted as saying, “I think people have always made the assumption that I’m Puerto Rican, and upon my correction, people always think that I’m offended by the assumption and I’m not. I’m just merely correcting them as to my origins” (Topel, 2007, para. 8). In this instance, Reyes suggested viewers’ assumptions about her Latina heritage informed

their impressions of her character's identity. When she was asked if the program's producers initially intended for the character to be Dominican, Reyes, reportedly said:

No, just Latina and I think it just kind of surfaced from me always reminding folks on the set and the writers. The assumption, me being from the East Coast, was "So, you're Puerto Rican?" No, no, no, I'm Dominican. "Oh, oh, I'm sorry." No, don't be sorry. I'm just letting you know that I'm from the Dominican Republic. "Oh, where's that?" You know, where Sammy Sosa's from? "Ohhh. The best baseball players in the world are from the DR [Dominican Republic], yo." So it would always kind of transpire and it just became part of the whole writing life of the character (Topel, 2007, para. 10).

Assuming of course Reyes made these statements, the decision to cast a Latina actress for a non-specific Latina identity could have presented some opportunities for Reyes and the writing staff to introduce some believable elements in the portrayal. If Reyes functioned as a cultural expert, she presumably was able to offer useful feedback to the writing staff and producers of the program. It is feasible for non-Latino writers to consult with Latino actors about matters of believability. Moreover, from a casting standpoint, if there is no need for a role to have a specific Latino identity, it is reasonable to direct Latino actors to perform their identities rather than another Latino identity. Logically, in such situations, an actor can introduce believable elements in their performance without having to research how to portray the Latino identity of the character.

To prompt discussions about physical appearances and viewers' assumptions about actors and characters' ethnic identities, I often used Cameron Diaz as an example of a well-known Latina actress who was never cast as a Latina in my discussions with

viewers. Even though Diaz rarely performed on television beyond guest hosting on *Saturday Night Live* and acting in some of the program's sketch comedy skits, she was a widely recognizable example of the physical diversity some viewers said they wanted to see portrayed. In the case of Diaz, her appearance is presumably less like a Latina person than an Anglo person. Discussions about Diaz's identity revealed some insights that could be applicable to characters if they had a similar appearance.

Viewers tended to not accept Diaz as a Latina actress, saying things like, "maybe she doesn't identify with the culture," as Vanessa said, and "maybe she sees herself as more Anglo," as José said. At the same time, her success as one the highest paid actresses does not advance acceptance of the diversity of Latino physical characteristics within the television or film industry. Diaz was not praised as a Latina actress. She was instead just an Anglo actress, and viewers respond to her as such. They questioned whether she feels a connection to a Latino identity. Several viewers stated that they did not have a problem with Diaz if she did not embrace a Latina identity, in part because they were aware that Diaz has an Anglo mother. Referring to actors such as Martin Sheen and Charlie Sheen (Estevez), a father and son of Latino descent, yet they are never cast for Latino roles, José said, "Can they relate to our community or you know that is my question?" Further explaining this idea after I asked him whether Cameron Diaz's success as an actress who seemed to escape the need to have her ethnic identity define the roles she performs, José said:

I think it is good and I think it is bad because I don't really see like anybody like contributing. I mean you have people like Oscar de la Hoya who come back and contribute to the community or you have, I don't really see or hear about, and

maybe that's what is missing? Maybe you don't hear about "okay, yeah they donated so much money" or "they have this huge organization" or this and this and that, and maybe that's what's missing? . . . There has got to be some kind of giving back. And, I don't really care about it because I can't say because I don't know if she does. But, you don't hear about it.

When José said "I don't really care about it," he indicated his lack of interest in Diaz. His somewhat dismissive response communicated his opinion that he should not feel a sense of connection to someone who might not share his feelings. For some viewers, such as José, actors needed to have a connection to Latino communities in addition to playing Latino roles in order for them to consider actors Latino. José believed when a person is famous and successful they feel a need "to come back and contribute to [their] community," if they feel a connection to their Latino heritage. Experiencing a Latino identity in your upbringing was also expressed as a distinguishing factor when viewers discussed actors' Latino identities. José and other viewers suggested some Latino actors feel more social distance from Latino communities than other actors. Viewers observed that these actors did not have what Dawson (1994) termed a "linked fate" to a Latino community (p. 80). Many minority actors' professional opportunities are inextricably linked to their ethnic/racial identities (Dawson, 1994; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 1999; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 2000; Turow, 1978).

Georgina and other viewers believed some actors' appearances afford them the option to professionally distance themselves from a Latino identity:

Well Cameron Diaz she's already got that big flashing last name, I don't think she wants to emphasize [her Latina heritage] any further, you know? I think if she

was going to speak out, against [industry discrimination] or for herself, she'd say 'it's my last name well isn't it obvious to you [that I am Latina]'. Or 'I don't think I have to point out to the world,' but since she is blond and she passes for White obviously, it brings her a ton more money to keep her mouth shut. If she was out there wearing her colors and being a total Latina, I think she would get a lot less work. Because they wouldn't feel that she could be sold to the market as like a mainstream actress, you know? I think that the people that are controlling money wouldn't be so confident and wouldn't be so confident to instill it to the masses as an image that she sells herself in, to sell that. Even though she is doing it, if she spoke up and did something different they would be all scared.

Georgina assumed that Diaz distanced herself from Latino communities to have more professional opportunities in an industry that would rather hire Anglo actors. Georgina implied actors whose appearances allow them to assume Anglo roles have to be willing to vocalize their opposition to casting discrimination.

While Diaz, Martin and Charlie Sheen are examples of hugely successful television and film actors and certainly, their physical appearances have afforded them opportunities many Latino actors do not have (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 1999; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 2000). Moreover, their success speaks volumes about the subjectivity of identity and the way physical appearances can influence identity assessments.

As Georgina and Miguel indicated some Latino actors' phenotypes might allow television professionals and viewers to more readily associate their performances with an Anglo or African American identity rather than a Latino identity, or a combination of any

of these identities. Actors who have both Latino and non-Latino ancestry, like Diaz, possibly perceive themselves as having multiple identities. However, casting decisions might reinforce some viewers' perceptions that actors who perform African American and Anglo roles are not persons of Latino ancestry. Furthermore, actors such as George Lopez and Salma Hayek, to name a few, might not have needed to continually assert their Latino identities given that they were widely accepted as Latino actors because of their appearances. Georgina, who commented about Diaz's appearance, told me on several occasions, people sometimes did not realize she is second generation Mexican American because of her physical appearance and her non-Spanish sounding surname. Georgina, however, said that she responded to these misperceptions by explaining that she is "Chicana," a response she considered a demonstration of her pride in her Mexican American heritage. Georgina and other viewers' observations of actors indicated that they might have preferred Latino characters that interact with other characters in Latino communities. Moreover, characters considered to have Anglo-like appearances might require more cultural signifiers than characters with mestizo physical features.

Given Names and Surnames

Aside from appearances, I was interested in knowing how viewers wanted identity communicated in Latino fictional characterizations, primarily because all the viewers I interviewed believed characters' identities could be communicated in subtle believable ways. The suggestion to communicate characters identities through characters' names emerged in a number of conversations with viewers. Elizabeth remarked, "I don't have a problem with actors playing roles where their ethnicity is not identified. By giving them a name like Dr. Rodríguez, you know who they are." Reiterating the perception that ethnic

identity cues should only be used when they are relevant to characterizations, she suggested names alone could communicate a character's Latino identity.

This was an interesting suggestion. When I reflected on my experiences, I recalled instances when someone determined that I was not Latina, simply based on my surname, Butcher. For instance, the first day interning with the Latino television network, I was given a tour of the offices and studios by a Latina member of the marketing staff. As we walked through the offices of the network, after hearing my full name, she commented, "I can't believe you are not Latina. You really look like you are Latina." If she had not heard my last name, I am not sure she would have made this assumption. Similarly, when I mentioned the Latino actor Benjamin Bratt to José, after hearing the actor's name, he responded, "Is he Latino?"

Communicating a character's Latino identity mainly through their name might work best in dramas, when the character's professional lives and workplaces are the focus of plots, rather than their home or personal lives. *Medium*, a legal drama, had a Latino district attorney character named Manuel Devalos, performed by actor Miguel Sandoval. Although Devalos was one of the main characters in the series, rarely did the stories provide any information about his life outside of his work. In this case, his name was seemingly the only clue that he was Latino, rather than an Italian or Anglo character, for instance.

Georgina, who had a non-Spanish sounding last name, discussed how names can communicate a Latino identity, and the confusion that sometimes occurs when one's name is not considered Latino or Mexican-sounding:

And it's like [actress] Jessica D'Alba, I mean people know because of the last name, but a lot of people like [actress] Salma Hayek, you know? I mean if it wasn't so known that she was Mexican, people would see the name on a piece of paper and go [had a puzzled expression on her face]. Because when people question my last name, I go well there is people like Salma Hayek and other people who don't have Hispanic surnames, last names. It's not as common as people think in Mexico, you know? I mean once you are actually there [in Mexico].

While Georgina was concerned some people do know about the prevalence of non-Spanish sounding last names in Latino populations, namely Mexico, she recognized how Spanish surnames signify a Latino identity.

Names might have had more significance for viewers because historically it has been common for Latino actors to use more Anglo American sounding stage names. As discussed in the previous section pertaining to actors' physical appearances, viewers considered whether actors were Latino when assessing whether the characters they perform are Latino. However, the practice of actors changing their names introduced some confusion about actor's identities. After raising the question about Benjamin Bratt's ethnic identity, José said, "Like, I don't know like why would you change your name to Benjamin Bratt or I don't know if that's his name." José assumed if he were Latino, he might have changed his name. If his name was "Benjamin Rodríguez," José might not have questioned his identity. In this case, however, Benjamin Brat is the actor's birth name, rather than just a stage name. I have not heard of reverse cases, whereby a Latino

actor, adopts a more Latino-sounding performance name to communicate their Latino identity.

According to a survey of Latino Screen Actors' Guild (SAG) members, actors were divided as to whether a Latino surname provided more or less opportunities when seeking work in the industry (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, & Noriega, 2000). However, many viewers considered the practice of adopting a non-Latino sounding stage name a reactive response to an industry that devalues Latino identities. Commenting about actor Martin Sheen, whose birth name is Ramon Antonio Gerard Estevez, Estelle said:

You know what I think is too bad is, why they didn't he keep the name? But, see that tells that they were afraid they weren't going to make it. To me, because they in, well say like the father Martin Sheen um, maybe at the time he was, he was getting into pictures maybe he knew that the Hispanic was not going to be hired. Although, Estelle recognized Sheen might have encountered some casting barriers if he used his birth name, she interpreted his decision to use a more Anglo sounding stage name as an expression of his lack of pride in his Latino heritage.

Estelle indirectly raised another concern when she expressed her disapproval of actor Andres García's decision to use the name "Andy García," as his performance name. If Andres was a character name, the character name would more clearly imply a Latino character than a character named Andy. If a character only has a Spanish or Latin surname and not a Latin or Spanish first name, their Latino identity could still be overlooked by viewers. Characters surnames are less frequently incorporated into program dialogues than characters first names. A Latina character in the Lifetime 2007 dramatic program *Side Order of Life* name was Vivvy Porter. Although, the character's

last name was not Spanish, I believed she was a Latina character, even though it was not explicitly stated in the first episode I watched, perhaps because of her first name and other cultural cues. However, if a character's first and last name do not suggest a Latino heritage, viewers might question the character's identity, especially, if there are not other cultural cues to suggest a Latino identity.

Cultural Cues within Program Settings

In addition to portraying characters' Latino identities through character names, viewers suggested programs might communicate characters' identities through cultural symbols in their living and environments and the foods they eat. These suggestions were also apparent when they described the cultural believability of Latino portrayals, evident in some of the interviewee excerpts included in Chapter 4. While there are other cultural cues programs could utilize, cultural symbols within characters environments and food were frequently mentioned during my conversations with viewers.

Miguel suggested programs might include "a mural of a Latin American artist," in a character's living environment. Artwork was an interesting suggestion. *The Cosby Show*, a sitcom about an African American family that aired on NBC for eight years after premiering in 1984, used various art images to communicate the family's pride in their heritage. For instance, one of African American painter Ellis Wilson's works titled, "The Funeral Procession," hung above the mantel in the family's living area, in addition to other artworks and cultural symbols within the characters living environment. In the opening credits for the final season there was a mural depicting an urban African American community, African American inspired jazz music and images of the actors dancing, and costume changes that included African apparel. These cultural cues carried

over into scenes in the episodes when family members or friends wore for instance, African attire. Yet, these cultural cues were not typically the focus of the programs narratives.

Programs' depictions of characters environments and cultural symbols within these environments can elicit viewers' associations between characters identities and their own, as Tomás indicated when he described how the PBS Latino-themed dramatic program *American Family* depicted Boyle Heights, an area of East L.A. Relating to the programs depiction of the environment, Tomás at one point said, "I grew up in that," referring to the neighborhood as a familiar cultural scene. Likewise, just as familiar or unfamiliar environments evoke emotional reactions in real-world situations, viewers might associate believable cultural scenes and symbols with characters' Latino identities.

Expressing the way viewers sometimes noticed these cultural cues, Armando recalled a minor restaurant scene:

Um, but I saw really subtle um, what I thought was a really subtle way of using the Spanish language and it was just for people who read in Spanish and it was um, I can't remember if it was in a cartoon or if it was in that movie? No, this was an English language cartoon and yeah, I think it was a cartoon. And anyway they show a restaurant scene and it is a Mexican restaurant and they just, the, the character just passes by the sign of you know Taco, whatever it was called. And it said in Spanish, it said "we spit in your food." And that is something that um, that see if, if you can read it, you'll can catch. But, it's "hey, did you guys see that [sign] said spit in your food." [I laugh]. But, if you just read that in the heading it

is just like “oh, it is a Mexican restaurant, it’s no big deal.” Um, that was I thought was a subtle way to throw it in your face, if that makes sense?

Even though Armando did not remember the name of the cartoon or even if it was a cartoon, he recalled this scene, indicating its salience. His observation that some viewers might not have understood the sign or the humor in its message, seemed to add to his enjoyment of the scene. He recognized the cultural cue as a clever effort to appeal to Latino viewers, in particular. Of course the statement had further significance because it expressed a form of cultural defiance non-Spanish literate viewers might miss, if they do not question what is written on the sign.

It was not surprising the food was frequently mentioned as an appropriate cultural cue for a fictional characterization. Certainly, food has important cultural significance in any culture. When I asked Estelle, “what kinds of ways would you like to see programs show Latino cultures? What do you think would be an appropriate way, based on your own experiences or something that you just don’t see on television?” She responded:

Well you know too, a, right now, what came to me was food. You know the character could say “Oh, you know this place has tortillas the way my mother made um,” or “they make *chili verde* the way my mom made it.” Or you know something along those lines.

Her thoughts of certain foods inspired fond memories of times with family members. Programs can elicit these sorts of responses when writers incorporate cultural cuisine in scenes as Eva indicated when she described in a scene the film *Mi Familia*, previously mentioned in Chapter 3. Just as persons tend to gather around meals, observing some

cultural rituals in real-life, characters can portray some of the same cultural practices as a way to communicate their Latino identities.

At the same time, Armando cautioned against production teams making overt cultural statements using food, or other cultural cues for that matter. “You know it is like everybody ordered the burger, but this guy orders the burrito. Right? What?” Armando explained, “You would run the risk with that is that, then it becomes, it could almost become stereotyping.” Armando questioned the believability of a hypothetical scene when there is one Latino character who orders a food item none of the other characters order. Armando believed such a scenario would seem too deliberate, and therefore less believable, especially when the food item is something as cliché as “a burrito.”

Other viewers mentioned very specific, less well-known cultural foods. Eva even suggested a context when the foods she mentioned would be eaten. In Chapter 3 Behind the Scenes, I revealed Armando’s and other viewers concerns about television production teams’ knowledge of Latino cultures. The question Armando raised was an important one: When does a cultural cue “run the risk” of “almost [becoming a stereotype]?” While the answer to this question is certainly subjective, viewers’ reactions to characterization details and their suggestions that programs include relevant and sometimes subtle cultural cues provided some insights pertaining to this question. When programs incorporate cultural foods that are not as well known in the appropriate contexts viewers might have positive reactions, similar to what Eva described. Such cultural markers convey a cultural awareness that encouraged stronger forms of identification.

Using Spanish to Convey Identity

Viewers readily suggested having characters speak natural sounding Spanish in situations when bilingual speakers would use Spanish would be another appropriate way to communicate their Latino identities. This suggestion emerged as a dominant theme in my conversations with viewers. Understanding how people experience language is important when considering the believability of using Spanish in fictional television portrayals. The experiences people have with language in their family homes, in schools and in their communities were reflected in their comments about television portrayals. I begin this section by describing their experiences with language, followed by a discussion about incorporating Spanish in programs.

Language and Identity Matters

Many scholars view language as the most salient aspect of the U.S. Latino identity (Baez, 2002; Berk-Seligson, 1980; Hurtado & Vega, 2004; Jacoby, 2004; Phinney & Flores, 2002; Plunkett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003; Valdes & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998; Zentella, 2002). At the same time, Spanish is heterogeneous in terms of dialectal differences, and controversial with regard to the connection between language and identity. This is a particularly relevant issue for second and third generation Latinos, who tend to demonstrate greater preference for speaking in English than their first generation parents and grandparents (Hurtado & Vega, 2004; Portes & Schauffler, 1996; Rumbaut, 1996). One survey suggested that 8 out of every 10 third generation Latinos speak predominantly English (Jacoby, 2004). Yet, nearly half of all second-generation Latinos are bilingual. According to a number of other studies, the language shift towards English monolingualism becomes more prominent with each subsequent generation (Baez, 2002;

Burnam, Telles, Hough, & Escobar, 1987; Hurtado & Vega, 2004; Phinney & Flores, 2002; Plunkett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003; Portes & Schauffler, 1996; Rumbaut, 1996; Silverstein & Chen, 1999; Veltman, 1988; Zentella, 2002). Generally speaking, however, second generations Latinos have “a much greater probability of retaining their parental language” than various other immigrant groups in the U.S. because of they are more likely to live in language rich environments, such as Los Angeles (Portes & Schauffler, 1996, p. 24). Most scholars agree with the presumption that environmental factors such as the predominant language spoken at home, socialization and language stigmatization influence fluency (Baez, 2002; Berk-Seligson, 1980; Hurtado & Vega, 2004; Jacoby, 2004; Phinney & Flores, 2002; Portes & Schauffler, 1996; Valdes & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998; Zentella, 2002). These are all issues that are particularly relevant for second and subsequent generations which encounter cultural pressures to be fluent in both languages.

Elena, who is third generation Mexican American, commented about the criticism later generation persons sometimes receive from first and second generation persons when they are not fluent Spanish speakers:

If you hear the way you speak it [Spanish]. It’s a different flavor from different areas of Latin America I think they should keep their Spanish language. I know in high school, I thought I knew Spanish. And then I go to college and I learned that I didn’t know Spanish correctly. Even people who know Spanish said I didn’t speak Spanish correctly. There’s a saying that you ‘have a *nopal*, a Spanish cactus, on your forehead.’ Like you are so indigenous looking you should [be able to speak in Spanish], when you appear to be [someone who could speak in Spanish] and you can’t speak Spanish.

After overhearing our conversation, Victor, a third generation Mexican American employee of the coffee shop we were patronizing mentioned a similar expression of this criticism, “‘A *Pocha*.’ An Americanized Mexican, not aware of your roots.”

Both Elena and Victor grew up hearing Spanish spoken in their environments. Elena’s bilingual mother encouraged her to learn the language when she was a child, though she admitted that growing up she rarely spoke Spanish. Elena is what is considered a heritage learner. She had a foundation for learning Spanish as a child; and then at later stages in her academic and personal development, she made a concerted effort to focus on improving her Spanish language proficiency. Heritage learners who were mainly monolingual English speakers, like Elena, tend to have a better language foundation than most non-heritage learners. Yet, having a considerable language foundation does not prevent linguistic insecurity (Martinez & Petrucci, 2004), especially when one is aware of the criticisms Elena and Victor discussed.

Elena, who was thirty-three years of age at the time of our conversation, believed that she needed to be proficient in Spanish to maintain a connection to her Mexican heritage. She described later generation persons who are not proficient in Spanish, as “people who’ve been detached from their culture.” At the time, as the mother of a fourth generation toddler, she was making a concerted effort to immerse her son in Spanish-dominant environments. When Elena explained her upbringing and how she hoped to raise her son, she reflected on the influences of environmental factors and personal decisions on language development:

Speaking only Spanish is making an effort to connect to your culture. Our identity [speaking to her sister] was affected because we were not living in the community

still. I put my son with a babysitter that only speaks Spanish to him. We spoke Spanish to our grandparents Mommy made a point to go and talk to people in Spanish. In Spanish we lack the vocabulary, so we are not secure in it .

Elena described their language apprehension, a phenomenon that is common among second and later generation persons (Baez, 2002; Hurtado & Vega, 2002; Martinez & Petrucci, 2004; Silverstein & Chen, 1999; Zentella, 2002).

Of course, not every second and later generation person is proficient in Spanish. Although most of the people I interviewed considered themselves bilingual, a number of the viewers I spoke with mentioned that they did not consider themselves proficient Spanish speakers. A few said that their Spanish was very limited, as Victor indicated. Language difficulties can inspire “social distance” that is the basis of intergenerational family tensions, apparent between children and grandparents that have limited interactions due to their “language incompatibilities” (Silverstein & Chen, 1999, p.189), something Victor described. “My grandma doesn’t speak English. I communicated to my grandma through whatever relative was there. I can get the gist of what is going on.”

When Victor continued explaining his perceptions, even though he did not consider himself a Spanish speaker, he admitted:

I’m afraid of losing my culture as I get older. With my children, I would put English as a priority because of where they live, but I would want them to identify with their culture. Maybe I’m so lucky because I am not so far removed from my culture. I really want to learn about my family from Mexico.

Naturally, experiencing social distance and criticism might lead someone to make such a conclusion. The fear of losing their connection to their Mexican heritage was what motivated Elena and Victor to appreciate their exposure to Spanish in their environments.

Many of the bilingual viewers I interviewed valued their proficiency in both languages. As Estelle explained, when speaking to her husband, “We have a choice because we do speak the language [Spanish]. That we can do either or, which is, is a blessing.” Agreeing with her, Carlos added, “It’s a plus. It’s a plus.” Although, Estelle was forbidden to speak in Spanish throughout her public school education because of existing school policies, she made an effort to maintain her knowledge of the language. Identifying the personal significance of the language, Estelle commented, “See my Spanish is in here [pats her chest] because I’m a native Californian.” Her gesture implied her knowledge of the language was more internal and a matter of cultural pride.

Nonetheless, Estelle implied her Spanish dialect was less “authentic,” than persons raised in Mexico, Central and Latin American, when she continued by saying, “So it depends I think on the character. If the character is from a certain country then it [their Spoken Spanish] should be more authentic.” In television programs, Estelle suggested first generation characters’ Spanish should be more authentic to reflect a native-like spoken use of the language. Her remarks further revealed the bicultural identity she described as distinctively different from Mexican persons, who are more immersed in the languages and cultures of Mexico than Mexican Americans. Some believe the Spanish spoken by Mexican Americans is less correct, informal, and therefore, in need of a separate categorization. Some educators, who question the similarity between Mexican American and Mexican Spanish, refer to Mexican American

Spanish as “Pocho Spanish,” implying it is less authentic as Estelle suggested (Berk-Seligson, 1980, p. 94).

Ileana, who is second generation Mexican American, mentioned she sometimes found it difficult to understand her older first generation Mexican relatives when they speak to one another in Spanish. There is greater linguistic intimacy when others are comparably fluent in a language. One can speak rapidly and be less conscious of their pronunciation. For all intents and purposes, Ileana was a fluent bilingual speaker. Yet, when she is speaking with her “*tías*” from Mexico (her mother’s cousins), she found it difficult to understand their Spanish since they were from a different part of Mexico than her parents. In one sense, their experiences living in the U.S., particularly living relatively close to one another in California, made their family connection stronger. On the other hand, dialectal differences also introduced some degree of social distance. This was even more evident with Ileana’s teenage nieces and nephews, who spoke U.S. Spanish less fluently than Ileana and who were in a different stage of life. Consequently, they felt it was simply not enjoyable to sit around and listen to their older relatives talk. So they had less interest in speaking Spanish or in improving their proficiency than their second generation relatives, even though, their lack of proficiency interferes with their communication with their relatives. In these situations, later generation children might rely on close relatives to translate, as Victor explained.

Code Switching

Incorporating Spanish in English language programs would most likely involve characters’ code switching. Code switching or switching between languages within a conversation is readily cited as an example of a bilingual person’s reinterpretation of

functionality of language. Many second and third generation persons challenge the perception that language codes are fixed by reinterpreting language rules in ways that represent memberships in particular communities, a phenomenon that is not unique to Latinos (Bailey, 2000; Berk-Seligson, 1980; Valdes & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998; Zentella, 2002). Code switching can serve many purposes when speaking with other bilingual persons, or when distinguishing oneself from monolingual speakers. The ability to switch between languages, sometimes in the same sentence, is something some bilingual speakers become quite skillful at doing. Applying English grammatical rules when speaking Spanish by ordering the words according to English syntax is another example of how bilingual speakers reinterpret the fluidity of linguistic codes. This is further exemplified in the creation of new terms that are not distinguishable as Spanish or English, yet influenced by both. Critics argue that blurred language boundaries are representative of bilingual speakers' language deficits rather than a function of contextual identities. This interpretation leads some educators (Berk-Seligson, 1980; Zentella, 2002) and viewers to perceive code switching negatively.

Despite the notable controversy over code switching, the viewers I spoke with contended that it was realistic to incorporate code switching in English language programs. Yet, some viewers believed it was not realistic for characters to switch between words in English and in Spanish within the same sentence or spoken statement. Elizabeth, a generation 1.5 school teacher and at the time, a parent to a toddler little girl said, "Dora the Explorer . . . I don't like the way they use Spanish. Throwing in words here and there. 'This is *fabuloso*.' I have issues with switching languages." Elizabeth switched from English to Spanish during our conversation, but always spoke in complete

sentences. Elizabeth's concerns as a high school educator, who believed young people were "getting dumber and dumber" might have informed her perceptions about "throwing in [Spanish] words here or there." Moreover, because most of the viewers I interviewed were fluent in both languages they could express complete thoughts in each language. Someone who has a lower proficiency level in Spanish is less likely to easily formulate thoughts in Spanish; and therefore, might switch languages while making statements simply because they find it difficult to complete a thought in one language or the other. Elizabeth, however, was born in Mexico so she had a strong Spanish foundation before moving to the U.S. as a child.

Unlike Elizabeth, several other viewers said they did not mind code switching, also known as Spanglish, even when it involved using a word or two in one language or the other, as José explained:

I don't really care because personally people just really kind of throw things out there anyways, naturally. You know what I mean? You go on the street and you will hear somebody and then they will switch you know? You know Spanglish is just all over the place. So, it doesn't really bother me. I mean I can see how people get upset but, I just think it's kind of like kind of natural.

José, who is second generation Mexican American, said he understands the criticism that code switching involves an improper use of either language. However, he contended bilingual speakers of Spanish and English "naturally" code switch between the languages. This was evident in the conversations I had with viewers, and in a number of the excerpts I included in this dissertation.

Occasionally, a bilingual speaker might switch from English to speaking in Spanish to have a private conversation with another bilingual speaker. When my roommate Ileana wanted to privately discuss issues related to identity with me during a social gathering, she switched to speaking in Spanish, before stopping and saying, “Wait a minute you’re not [bilingual and Latina]-I forgot [laughs].” Although, she was surprised that she switched to Spanish when talking with me, it would have been natural for her to do so with another bilingual Latina/o speaker. For instance, on another occasion, when the skirt ripped away from the front bumper of my car, I went to a Toyota dealership near where I lived. I was shocked to hear that I would need to replace the entire part, and that it would cost around \$450, even though it was a simple piece of plastic that served no particular function. When I asked the repair specialist whether there was a way to reattach the part, he leaned towards me and told me in Spanish that it could easily be reattached if I just found someone who knew about cars. It was natural for him to speak in Spanish when he was telling me something that he did not want his employer to overhear. Although I did not speak in Spanish when I asked him about the cost for repairing the car, he assumed, based on my physical appearance, I would understand Spanish.

These sorts of scenarios work well in a television program. Miguel described similar scenes in the NBC police drama *Law & Order* featuring detective Reynaldo “Rey” Curtis, performed by Latino actor Benjamin Bratt. Speaking about detective Rey, Miguel said, “I saw him as a regular person. The only time you they remind you that he is Latino is, let’s say, when one of the suspects is Latino and he might speak to him in Spanish.” If a character interacts with someone who switches from English to speaking

in Spanish during a conversation, viewers are likely to assume the characters are Latino, unless their pronunciations of Spanish words indicate otherwise. If a detective character speaks to a suspect in Spanish, and his pronunciation sounds unnatural, viewers would likely assume the character is a non-Latino detective, unless of course, there are other cultural cues that suggest the character is a second or later generation Latino person.

Incorporating Spanish and Managing Translations

A number of bilingual viewers mentioned that they were bothered when phrases were spoken in Spanish and then translated word for word into English. Bilingual speakers felt it was irritating to hear phrases repeated. They would rather not hear direct translations. As Miguel explained, “It bothers me when you have a character that speaks in Spanish, then, they translate the whole sentence in English. What bugs me is when they say the same line over in English or Spanish.”

Explaining the importance of believability in translations, Elizabeth described the use of a bilingual parrot character named Paco in the PBS children’s cartoon series *Maya & Miguel*. Parrots are known for repeating what persons say; therefore, Elizabeth did not find the parrot’s direct translations problematic. After Elizabeth described the cartoon I watched an episode that aired on a Saturday morning. While watching the episode, I learned the main child characters Maya and Miguel were bilingual siblings, who tended to code switch between Spanish and English. The parrot was not in every scene and did not translate everything that was said by the child characters. At the same time, the parrot’s voice and the way the parrot repeated phrases seemed believable as Elizabeth suggested. The episode I watched was followed by a public service announcement featuring a little boy who after first saying he speaks Spanish at home and English at

school and sometimes gets confused about which language to think in or speak, talked about it being “cool” to be bilingual. The program seemed to emphasize Spanish and English language apprehension as well as pride in bilingualism, an approach that appealed to Elizabeth, a bilingual parent.

Some programs avoided direct translations by using subtitles or not providing translations at all, as shown in the ABC dramatic series *Lost*, a program about the adventures of a diverse group of survivors of a plane crash on a mysterious unknown Pacific island with hidden dangers and unraveling connections to the characters’ lives prior to the crash. While the series premiered after my field experience in Los Angeles, in September 2005, the program included believable uses of languages. Two of the characters were Korean nationals Jin-Soo Kwon and his wife Sun Kwon (performed by actor Daniel Dae Kim and actress Yun-jin Kim). Jin-Soo was a monolingual Korean speaker, though his wife character was a bilingual Korean and English speaker. On occasion, the show’s writers used subtitles to translate Jin’s lines. In other instances, Sun translated his statements when he spoke to other characters in Korean.

If program writers believe direct translation from English to Spanish is necessary they might have one character translate for another, repeating the essence of what was said, not a word-for-word translation. This seemed more believable so viewers seemed to not be bothered by these sorts of translations. One scene in the Lifetime dramatic 2007 series, *Side Order of Life* accomplished this effectively when the Latina character Vivy visited her doctor with her monolingual Spanish speaking mother and her Anglo best friend Jenny, the main protagonist. Vivy’s mother and best friend were shown with Vivy in the doctor’s office as her doctor explained to Vivy that she had cancer. When Vivy

translated what the doctors said for her mother, she downplayed the severity of her diagnosis by leaving out some of the details of her condition.

For second generation persons maintaining Spanish fluency can also be a matter of necessity, particularly when one or both parents have a limited English proficiency, as was the case for a number of the viewers I interviewed. While some viewers expressed the belief that people can get by in cities where Spanish is widely spoken such as Los Angeles as a non-English speaker, certainly some activities are more difficult if you are a mono-lingual Spanish speaker. For this reason, second generation children are often well-trained translators (Faulstich Orellana, Dorner & Pulido, 2003; Worthy, 2006). This scene in *Side Order of Life* was believable because a mother would want to attend her daughter's doctor's appointment, even if she could not understand what the doctor would say. Likewise, as a second generation person she might have been accustomed to translating for her mother, especially when it involved important matters such as health care.

For bilingual speakers, contextual factors inform many language use decisions. To whom someone is speaking and the environment in which the communication takes place can heavily influence the language individuals chose to speak. For instance, when addressing elderly persons or first generation persons, speaking Spanish can be an important demonstration of respect (Zentella, 2002). In such situations, when second and later generation characters speak with first generation persons they could speak in Spanish, as Miguel suggested. Bilingual speakers are also likely to speak Spanish when talking with someone with whom they have a personal relationship. For this reason, Miguel appreciated Nurse Espinosa in *Scrubs* use of Spanish when she spoke to her

husband. “They [the program’s writers] use Spanish when she’s upset with him, when she is trying to express something with more substance.” Describing his own use of Spanish, Miguel said, “At home I switch and speak in Spanish when it means more in Spanish,” indicating the intimacy he felt when speaking Spanish. Edberto argued, when code switching:

It isn’t the words you are saying. What’s important is what is being communicated. And what is being communicated, you can’t translate . . . Because usually with code switching that is what you are doing. You are communicating not with the words. You are trying to relate on a different cultural, emotional level You know that is something that people who are monolingual can’t ever experience.

Bilingual speakers have the option of communicating in two languages. Their awareness that words and expressions have different connotations in one language versus the other informs their use of the two languages. Their language choices when speaking with another bilingual person can reveal more about the tone of the conversation and their recognition of a shared identity as bilingual Spanish/English speakers.

Meanings of words or expressions do not always translate across languages, as Edberto suggested:

I remembered this one time in psychology, this, this professor we were talking about the problems with translating, translating English surveys to Spanish, right? And one question was “Are you talkative?” And I wrote “yes.” Then when he gave me the Spanish version “*Eres hablador?*” [Regina laughs]. And see, I put “no.” Because to me that word means gossip, gossipier.

Laughing, his sister, Regina, said “gossiper” at the same time. The survey writer assumed “*Eres hablador?*” was a direct translation of the question “Are you talkative?” Even though *hablador* is a conjugation of the verb *hablar*, “to speak,” the question has a different connotation in Spanish. Writers who incorporate Spanish in their narratives have to consider differences in translations to effectively convey ideas. If writers are aware of differences in implied meanings they might incorporate these misunderstandings in their narratives in a humorous way. Just as Edberto and Regina found the translation humorous, other bilingual viewers might find portrayals of similar misunderstandings between characters humorous.

Concerning language, it is important to distinguish between speaking abilities and comprehension. When a person grows up in environments where they interact with fluent Spanish speakers, it is likely that they understand many phrases and words even if they are not a fluent speaker of language. Demonstrating the difference between comprehension and the spoken use of a language, some second and later generation persons respond to their Spanish-speaking parents in English (Hurtado & Vega, 2002). With this language practice in mind, it would also be believable if a second or later generation character responded in English after a parent character addresses them in Spanish.

The English-language soap opera *Passions*¹³ included a Latino bilingual matriarchal character Pilar Lopez-Fitzgerald who occasionally spoke to her adult children in Spanish; however, her children responded in English. While Pilar would only speak a

¹³ The soap opera aired on NBC from 1999 until 2007; and then DIRECTV bought exclusive rights to the series, before its final year of production in 2008.

few words in Spanish, her phrases were not translated, nor were subtitles used in the episodes I watched. In one episode, Pilar spoke with her daughter Teresa on the phone, expressing her concern she said “*mi hija* [my daughter or sweetheart]” before further advising her. There is a certain intimacy that was communicated through this expression and her use of Spanish. This was a believable use of Spanish and a clear cultural cue. It was unlikely a non-Latino person would use this expression.

Chapter Summary

During my discussions with second and later generation Latino viewers, they suggested various ways program producers and writers can express characters Latino identities in believable ways. Namely, they indicated television production teams could convey characters’ Latino identities through characters’ names, cultural symbols in program settings and through natural sounding Spanish when bilingual speakers would speak Spanish in similar real-world situations. Their suggestions revealed more about viewers’ attentions to character details and their comparisons of fictional characters to real life persons.

While the cultural cues they suggested are believable indicators of a Latino identity, programs need to use a combination of these cues to communicate characters ethnic identities. When subtle cultural cues are used in characterizations they could be overlooked by viewers. However, the use of natural-sounding Spanish might be the only exception. At the same time, there are many contextual and social/experiential factors that inform language use decisions, television professionals need to consider these differences.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative field study explored second and later generation Mexican American viewers and a few Salvadorian American viewers' perceptions of the cultural believability of Latino fictional portrayals in English language television programs. By cultural believability, I am referring to the aspects of characterizations that express characters' Latino identities. In addition to exploring their receptions of Latino portrayals, I investigated my informants' beliefs about the ways television programs conveyed Latino identities. In this chapter, I attempt to highlight the contributions of this work with regard to viewers' cultural believability appraisals, addressing viewer distrust of industry professionals, developing culturally believable portrayals, and directions for further research.

Cultural Believability Appraisals

In this field study, viewers based their believability appraisals on whether they could imagine real-life persons having characteristics similar to the fictional characters they watched on television (Jhally & Lewis, 2003). Likewise, industry professionals recognize believability as an important aspect of scriptwriting and actors' performances (Kubey, 2004). Yet few, if any, previous minority reception studies referenced perceived realism literature. I argue this literature provides meaningful explanations for viewers' interpretations of ethnic/racial portrayals. Furthermore, I suggest researchers employ the concept cultural believability in their study of representations. Based on this exploratory investigation and perceived realism literature, I conceptualize cultural believability appraisals as the judgments one makes about a cultural portrayal based on their

knowledge and beliefs about a given culture. I am therefore postulating that these appraisals are subjective and thus dependent on one's experiences. Someone who is a cultural insider is likely to be more critically attentive to the believability of the cultural markers for that identity than someone who is a cultural outsider. It is important to note that people typically have multiple identities that could be reflected in their believability appraisals (i.e. regional identities, generational identities, family roles). For instance, in this field study, viewers lived in the Los Angeles area. Therefore, they were likely more attentive to the authenticity of portrayals of their living environment than viewers who do not have this first-hand knowledge. Because they were able to watch program tapings, and observe and interact with persons working in the television industry they had a unique familiarity with the television industry. And this industry knowledge was part of the criteria for judging the believability of representations.

Believability judgments involve a variety of considerations, namely, whether representations on television to some extent resemble real life. Because viewers recognize television productions' adherence to certain conventions that restrict their literal realism (e.g. time limitations, common scripts, unusually beautiful characters, predictable endings), they tend to have lower perceived realism judgments of television content in general and higher believability expectations for specific aspects of television content (Busselle, 2003; Busselle & Greenberg, 2000; Collins & Wellman, 1982; Dorr, 198; Graves, 1976; Greenberg & Reeves, 1976; Hall, 2003; Hawkins, 1977; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Potter, 1986; Potter, 1992). Consequently, viewers might judge a series or episode as generally unrealistic, yet find an interaction or even a character's line culturally believable. In this regard, the informants for this study clearly differentiated

between aspects of programs and characters they perceived as believable and those they did not. Because viewers' judgments of characterizations involve different levels of specificity it was important to explore the aspects of characterizations that had particular salience with regard to their cultural believability judgments.

When viewers described whether a characterization was culturally believable, they typically discussed actors' performances, program narratives and their impressions of producers', writers' and actors' knowledge of Latino cultures. Their reactions not only communicated their distrust of industry professionals, it also suggested the importance of cultural knowledge. As presented throughout this dissertation, viewers suggested that clearly realistic cultural details in characterizations made it easier for them to adopt the perspective of the character (Cohen, 2001). The most meaningful aspects of culture are often "implicitly learned" (Weaver, 1986, p. 135). Therefore, viewers might experience stronger forms of identification when viewing subtle cultural expressions that might only be known to other insiders or persons who are intimately familiar with a culture. Based on this field study and research concerning the social importance of ethnic/racial minority portrayals (Ellis, Streeter & Engelbrecht, 1983; Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Shapiro & Lang, 1991; Trotman Reid, 1979), I contend minority viewers might be especially attentive to the cultural believability of same ethnicity/race characters.

For these reasons, approaching minority reception studies from a cultural believability standpoint offers several advantages. By investigating viewers' believability appraisals researchers can further theorize matters of representations and character development. In so doing, researchers can offer additional theoretical

explanations for viewers' receptions and specific insights industry professionals can consider when making character decisions.

Salience of Cultural Portrayals in Memory-based Appraisals

During the fieldwork, viewers recalled scenes and characters' lines in programs that had been off the air for more than a decade. Occasionally, people recalled instances when characterizations inspired a strong reaction, yet they did not remember the title of the television program or film. At times, they only recalled information that was relevant to their reaction to the characterization. The fact that they remembered a particular scene or character in detail after a period of years, even when they did not remember the title of the program or film, highlighted the significance of the characterization as a social representation.

They seemed to be more involved in the believability judgment process when characters portrayed their ethnic group (Busselle, 2001). Audience identification literature posits that viewers typically focus their attention on leading protagonists rather than secondary characters (Hoffner & Cantor, 1999; Jose & Brewer, 1984; Macoby & Wilson, 1957; Macoby, Wilson & Burton, 1958; Zillman, 1994). However, as the findings of this field study suggest, viewers can have detailed accounts of secondary characters when they conform to or counter negatively-valued stereotypes of their ethnic/racial group.

Their awareness that persons outside their ethnic group viewed such portrayals and made judgments consistent with these portrayals influenced their interpretations of characterizations. There is little doubt cultural representations on television have some influence on peoples' social judgments (Busselle, 2001; Ellis, Streeter & Engelbrecht,

1983; Hawkins, 1977; Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Shapiro, 1991). For this reason, viewers naturally compared fictional television characters to the social identities they represented. They also considered the ways television programs portrayed social groups over time and across networks.

All the viewers I interviewed observed the selective ways television programs presented Latino identities in comparison to other social identities. The creative minds behind television programs grant legitimacy to some social identities with favorable portrayals, while denying others with less favorable images that perpetuate negatively-valued social identities (Children Now, 1999; Trotman Reid, 1979; Rivadeneyra, 2006). Viewers generally have negative evaluations of characters that behave in socially undesirable ways. Characterizations can influence cross-cultural understanding depending on the manner that ethnic groups are depicted (Cohen, 2001; Gillespie, 2003; Lerner, 1980; Raney, 2005; v Felitzen & Linné, 1975). Negative evaluations can lead to a lack of empathy for ethnic characters that are negatively depicted (Cohen, 2001; Lerner, 1980; Raney, 2005; v Felitzen & Linné, 1975; Wilson & Cantor, 1985). In the larger scheme of things, Latino fictional characterizations influenced their real-world experiences. Images of Latinos as servants and criminals contribute to ethnic discrimination.

Exaggerated Cultural Differentiations

Exaggeration is a common narrative convention in both television dramas and comedies. However, viewers found decisions to exaggerate identity markers problematic, but not other forms of exaggeration. One of the contributions of this research was evident in viewers' disagreement with television professionals' decisions to exaggerate

ethnic/racial identity cues. This was something that previous Latino audience studies had not explored. In viewers' opinions, many Latino depictions reflected broad cultural generalizations that were not as evident in non-Latino portrayals (i.e. believable accents, diverse professions, subtle cultural cues). The ways that programs excluded realistic details supported viewers' impression that Anglo writers lacked knowledge of Latino cultures or intentionally depicted Latino persons in undesirable ways.

Supporting their conclusions, content analyses have demonstrated that Latinos have been more underrepresented than other minorities in television programs (Greenberg & Baptista-Fernandez, 1980; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Hoffman, 2003; Hoffman & Noriega, 2004a; Hoffman & Noriega, 2004b; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). Moreover, studies revealed that portrayals have included harmful stereotypes of Latinos as low-skilled laborers, lazy, uneducated, poor, and as criminals (Vargas & Depyssler, 1998). Viewers claimed the repetitive use of the same clichés has normalized these cultural assumptions. These sorts of responses were not at all surprising. Television programs reproduce similar character types (Turow, 1978; Webster, Phalen & Lichty, 2006).

Television programs often portray a dichotomy of Latino images as either characters who assimilate into the dominant Anglo culture or as characters who act as social deviants, resisting assimilation. In many dramas, assimilated ethnic characters represent forms of authority. They are often the law enforcement officers and medical professionals who serve their ethnic communities, yet they have detached themselves from their communities socially, culturally and economically.

These narratives often depict assimilation as a means to achieve “the American dream” of a middle class lifestyle, whereas, the decision to not assimilate results in a life of perpetual poverty without the social capital to negotiate a better life for oneself or one’s family. If narratives follow this dominant ideology, programs portray second-generation characters as persons pulled between two conflicting cultures, unable to reconcile their pride in their ethnic identity with their “American dream,” a dream that is most often depicted using characters that are the protectors or enforcers of our laws, the saviors in our hospitals, and through characters who represent the driving forces behind economic success. These character types are less often Latino characters. Latino characters are too often on the opposing side of the law or characters that need protagonists to save them from their circumstances/predicaments.

Instead, my informants suggested programs should reflect their multicultural identities as Americans, socially and culturally connected to their Mexican or Salvadorian heritage. They suggested they share common experiences with persons of other ethnicities/races socialized in the United States and perceived exaggerated cultural differentiations as an obstacle to identification. Viewers identify with fictional characters of other ethnicity/races (Cohen, 2001; Gillespie, 2003). The informants for this field study indicated that they sometimes found it easier to identify with Anglo and African American characters because they were more believable. It was difficult for viewers to identify with same ethnicity characters that demonstrated for instance, exaggerated behaviors and speech. In conversation after conversation, viewers used the word “exaggerated” to express their perception that a character lacked believability and reinforced cultural clichés. During conversations with viewers, I questioned whether

under certain circumstances they perceived cultural exaggerations positively rather than negatively.

Their opinions of comedic depictions added an interesting dimension to their believability assessments. Humorous uses of stereotypes did not always elicit a negative response from viewers. The distinction here was whether they believed the intention was to disavow a stereotype or to provide social commentary that they would respond to positively. Consequently, viewers had different reactions to comedic cultural clichés depending on whether they viewed them as an “intelligent use of stereotypes” versus a “demeaning” use of stereotypes. This indicated that they were not entirely opposed to the use of cultural clichés and highlighted the importance of their interpretations of television professionals’ intentions.

Addressing Viewer Distrust

While my informants wanted to see more representations in mainstream programs, they hoped that the industry would not replicate the mistakes of the past by continuing to reinforce harmful stereotypes. Because of this concern viewers expressed some skepticism regarding future portrayals. Naturally after years of limited, often derogatory portrayals, viewers did not expect television producers and writers to clearly understand how to realistically depict Latinos in their fictional narratives. The Mexican American and Salvadorian American viewers I interviewed expressed an overall impression that the television industry was resistant to developing characters that deviated from the standard fare of Latino characterizations. The viewers in this field study were aware of some of the social and economic boundaries that stand in the way of changing Latino television representations, especially when there are few Latinos in

creative positions in the television industry. However, they argued that the television industry cannot continue to exclude Latino characters in programs because they represent such a sizable portion of the audience.

Given that viewers perceived Latino characterizations as frequently stereotypical, they might have focused on the aspects of characterizations they perceived as stereotypical. Because they were able to draw upon examples of non-Latino television characterizations that exhibited more realistic characteristics than many of the Latino characterizations they saw in programs, they assumed television industry professionals generally believed the stereotypes or they intentionally portrayed Latino persons in a particular way because of their assumptions about their audience.

Even though generally speaking Mexican Americans and Salvadorian Americans have more economic struggles than Anglo persons in the United States, my informants were displeased with the frequency of lower class images. They were not interested in seeing only idealized depictions. Jhally and Lewis' (2003) study offers a viable explanation for their responses. Referring to *The Cosby Show*, the African American viewers in their study indicated that the program was symbolic of the growing equality of television representations. Television programs have typically focused on middle and upper class lifestyles. Consequently, the viewers in Jhally and Lewis' study perceived the "upper middle class status" of the fictional Cosby family as "a mark of normalcy" (2003, p. 280). In their view, *The Cosby Show* was consistent with family images typical of television programs. As in Jhally and Lewis' study, viewers in this field study believed that the lack of middle class portrayals was an unnecessary form of cultural differentiation.

Their awareness that programs can expose viewers to cultures they might not directly experience, a dimension of perceived realism appraisals Potter (1986) refers to as the instruction dimension, contributed to their concerns about lower class depictions. This emerged as an important theme during my discussion with viewers. They were generally concerned that the larger viewing audience was aware of Latino working class persons, but not as aware of the many Latino middle class families. Moreover, a number of my informants were college-educated middle-class persons who wanted to see characters that reflected their identities.

The increased number of Latino-themed programs has provided opportunities for a few Latino television professionals to display their talents. However, the concentration of characters in primarily Latino-themed programs inadequately reflects television's capacity to portray the diversity of U.S. populations in the neighborhoods and workplaces. Network executives' decisions to add a few Latino-themed programs and the absence of Latino characters in other programs highlights what Gray (2001) refers to as a "separate but equal" approach to television programming (p. 450). Whether this approach truly accomplishes equality is another concern (Gray, 2001). Certainly, many cities have ethnic enclave neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the question remains whether portraying characters only in these settings is realistic. Viewers in this field study contended that if programs strived for believability Latino persons would have an obvious presence in diverse fictional settings. In different instances, most of the viewers indicated that they wished to see Latino characters in multi-cultural casts in addition to networks airing Latino-themed programs.

Despite examples of believable Latino cultural portrayals, people working in the industry need to counter the perception that stereotypical characters are the norm. Some viewers indicated some cultural generalizations would appear less problematic if television portrayed a greater diversity of Latino characters (Rivadeneyra, 2006). Although television programs present stereotypes of Anglos, collectively such portrayals tend to have more subtle ethnic cultural identifiers, with the exception of Italian American characters, whose cultural markers are sometimes exaggerated in derogatory ways. Nonetheless, when Anglo characters are juxtaposed against less frequent and less favorable images of ethnic/racial minorities, these exaggerated cultural differentiations reinforce harmful stereotypes.

Writers emphasize assumptions about cultural differences by introducing oppositional points of view, which they sometimes define according to ethnic/racial differences (Cook, 2007; Smith, 1999). Alternatively, more programs could offer audiences diverse characters that bear some similarities to Latino viewers' experiences. By adhering to cultural stereotypes, many characterizations miss the richer details that encourage viewers to identify with character's situations, personalities and relationships.

Naturally, even though viewers recognized a shared Latino identity across heritage nationalities and identified with Latino characters in general (Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 1999; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 2000), they were especially interested in the cultural believability of portrayals of their own heritage nationality. As cultural insiders, they offered detailed critiques that conveyed their authority to speak about the authenticity of these characters. Their reactions to

characterizations and interest in industry decisions also indicated their desire to see characters that reflected their experiences.

Viewers might be more critical and knowledgeable about production decisions than many television professionals believe. Empirical studies suggest, even as children, individuals are “active,” “selective,” “rational” viewers, with “complex interpersonal analysis strategies” for assessing media content (Weintraub, Roberts & Nass, 1990, p. 562). Nonetheless, successful writers are sometimes encouraged by network executives to dumb down scripts because they assume their audiences might not appreciate their complexity (Kubey, 2004). However, this field study and other empirical studies indicate viewers can be highly critical when programs depict their ethnic or racial identities (Jhally & Lewis, 2003; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 1999; Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza & Noriega, 2000; Rivadeneyra, 2006; Ross, 2001; Warren, Orbe & Greer-Williams, 2003).

In this field study, viewers’ assumptions about production decisions influenced their interpretations of characterizations, as explained in Chapter 3, *Behind the Scenes*. After reflecting on the ways the television industry and daily life in Los Angeles sometimes intersected for viewers, I realized their comments were not as surprising as I had initially assumed. While the informants for this field study lived in the Los Angeles area, a previous study indicated that viewers considered producers’ economic motivations (Phelps, 1976). This suggests that even viewers who are not as frequently exposed to the television industry might also consider industry decisions when making believability appraisals.

During interviews with adults and adolescents, Phelps (1976) learned that viewers often read print materials about the television industry. In the 1970s, the viewers Phelps interviewed were aware of the economic motivations behind television productions, though they had a limited knowledge of the economics of the industry. Phelps identified a need for further research “to determine whether information about the television industry will encourage people to be more evaluative of programming” (p. 1). Yet, seemingly, other reception and perceived realism studies have not explored the way viewers’ assumptions about production decisions might influence their cultural believability judgments. Since the 1970s, viewers’ environments have become even more inundated with information about television productions. With the increased number of reality programs, magazine news shows (*E News*, *The Daily 10*, *Entertainment Tonight*), televised actor biography programs (e.g. *The E True Hollywood Story*, *Actors’ Studio*), and a more diverse range of print materials, not to mention online sites, the average viewer has greater insight into production processes and actors’ experiences than ever before. Thus, it is important to consider the ways that industry knowledge might influence viewers’ believability assessments and receptions of television content.

While television professionals bring their socio-cultural and industry-oriented assumptions to the production process, whether they are a cultural insider or outsider does not solely determine their knowledge of Latino cultures. Non-Latino industry professionals could potentially increase viewer trust by developing more culturally believable characterizations that deviate from the standard fare of Latino character types often presented on television. A number of suggestions emerged from this field study pertaining to developing culturally believable fictional portrayals of second and later

generation Latino persons. However, the intention of this dissertation research was not to further pigeonhole Latino characterizations with guidelines for the portrayal of Latinos in television programs. Rather, the findings presented in this dissertation express the importance of having credible cultural details in Latino fictional characterizations.

Developing Culturally Believable Portrayals

Viewers indicated television programs could be entertaining and still include believable cultural details. Viewers tended to prefer that writers and producers leave more room in program narratives for viewers to have different interpretations, rather than programs continually communicating character information through blatant stereotypes. This was most evident when viewers talked about how they wanted characters' Latino identities conveyed in a more subtle manner. Several recommendations emerged during my discussion with Mexican American and Salvadorian American viewers: a) characters could be identified solely by their Spanish names (e.g. Dr. Rodriguez), b) cultural identifiers within program settings (e.g. foods, artwork and cultural symbols that express characters pride in their Latino heritage) and c) natural sounding Spanish in situations when bilingual speakers would speak in Spanish (topics discussed in detail in Chapter 5 Character Development).

Even though television professionals have largely ignored the diversity of Latino populations, Mexican American and Salvadorian American viewers naturally were attentive to these differences. Viewers demonstrated an interest in watching characters with traits such as natural sounding accents consistent with their Latino heritage, nationality and regional differences. Although the heterogeneity of Latino populations concerning given names and surnames, experiential differences, varied dialects, Spanish

use and proficiency further supports the need for attention to cultural believability. These differences make it necessary to include multiple cultural indicators in fictional characterizations. Because appearances vary among Latinos, viewers were not always aware characters were Latino or even the characters' heritage nationality (Ríos, 2000). In several instances, viewers assumed a character had a different Latino identity than the one described in the character bio. The character Rosario in the situation comedy *Will & Grace* was one of the few, if not the only, Salvadorian character on television at the time of this field study. However, several Mexican American viewers assumed she was a Mexican character because the program apparently did not provide cultural cues that would lead them to assume otherwise. She might as well have been Mexican because she spoke with a generic foreign accent.¹⁴

As discussed in Chapter 5, examples of programs exist which use ethnic cues successfully. It is important to distinguish between assimilated characters and characterizations that could potentially hinder intercultural understanding. Mexican American and Salvadorian American viewers were justifiably sensitive to characters stripped of any ethnic markers. Characterizations should include cultural signifiers that reflect the experiences of Latino persons. At the same time, conveying the heterogeneity of Latino populations requires approaching each of these cultural identifiers with sensitivity to experiential differences.

Many of the most popular, longest-running television programs were based on the personal stories of the program's creators (i.e. *I Love Lucy*, *Roseanne*, *Everybody Loves*

¹⁴ Shelley Morrison, the actress who played the Latina maid character Rosario in the program *Will & Grace*, is an American of Spanish ancestry.

Raymond, *The Cosby Show*). Well-written characters in programs generate and maintain audiences (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). The ethnic/racial and social identities of the main characters in these programs were conveyed to their audiences, yet were not central to their characterizations. This and the fact that the characters were based on real-life experiences added to believability. The timelessness of *I Love Lucy* might be in part due to the cultural believability elements incorporated into the program—because Lucy Arnez loosely based the program on her real-life relationship with her husband Desi Arnez. During the program development stage, industry executives pressured Lucy Arnez to cast an Anglo actor as her husband rather than her real-life Cuban-American husband. Because of her persistence *I Love Lucy* aired in 1951 as the first program to depict an interracial relationship. To the surprise of the industry naysayers the audience did not seem to care. The comedic chemistry between Lucy and Desi made the show so hugely popular that viewers scheduled their evening activities around the program's schedule, some even closed their businesses to watch the lovable duo (Bramlett-Solomon, 2007). My roommate's third generation nieces and nephews were able to watch *I Love Lucy* and still enjoy it many years after the series ended. Almost fifty years later, they enjoyed the humorous narratives and characters and identified with the way the writers and Desi Arnez incorporated an authentic Cuban accent and Spanish in the dialogue.

In these programs, the lead actors/program creators functioned as cultural experts. However, in comparison to most actors, they had more creative control of their program's content. If writers consult with Latino actors about their characters and scripts, actors can also function as cultural experts. Just as programs such as *E.R.*, *L.A. Law* and *Law & Order* consult with medical professionals, lawyers and police officers, television

executives could hire cultural consultants. The believability of cultural aspects of characterizations is as important as realistically portraying characters' professions.

When considering conventional practices, it is important to state that a certain amount of social typing may be impossible to avoid in television characterizations. Television writers tend to use cultural generalizations in narratives to communicate many ideas quickly because of production and episode time constraints. The question is whether the form of social typing used in programs has a demeaning social connotation for ethnic/racial minorities. For instance, when Gray (1995) analyzed the production techniques behind the 1980s popular African American-themed sitcom, *A Different World*, he found that unlike numerous other sitcoms the program had a diverse African American cast in a fictional African American college environment. In the program, there were obvious symbols in their living spaces that confirmed their ethnic identity as well as various efforts on the part of the production team to ensure the authenticity of the characters and narratives. Over the course of the series, viewers were invited into the lives of the fictional characters, who were students attending a historically Black university. It is important to note that this was a new program premise when a diverse array of African American characters populated the fictional television world (Gray, 2005). Moreover, the narratives in *A Different World* addressed contemporary issues facing African American college students, such as racism and discrimination.

Nonetheless, the program developers conceptualized the roles based on cultural types:

Whitley [. . . was] the pampered and fair southern bell; Freddie [. . . was] the politically correct neo-urban hippie; Dwayne Wayne [. . . was] the b-boy computer engineer; Ron [. . . was] the self-absorbed budding entrepreneur; Kim [.

. . was] the serious and gifted pre-med student; [and] Jaleesa [. . . was] the returning student and sometimes the adult voice (Gray, 1995, p. 99).

What is important in terms of Gray's analysis is that these cultural clichés were unrelated to any particular ethnic/racial identity or stereotype. *A Different World* is also an interesting example because several Latina viewers in this field study indicated they would enjoy a similar series, focusing on the lives of Latino college students. Latino characters could just as easily be any of the social types Gray described. At the same time, the idea of a similar program featuring Latina characters appealed to viewers as a welcomed alternative.

In this, and other instances, the Mexican American and Salvadorian American viewers I interviewed compared Latino depictions to portrayals of minorities. They observed more depictions of African Americans than Latinos and the consensus was African Americans were often negatively depicted. It is likely that there are similarities in the ways ethnic minorities perceive matters of cultural believability given that minorities share common experiences (Ross, 2001; Warren, Orbe & Greer-Williams, 2003).

When Ross (2001) identified a number of dissatisfactions African American and Asian viewers shared concerning their representations on British television she reported similar findings. Related to this field study, the viewers who participated in Ross' focus group discussions were concerned with the limited range of characterizations. This range, in their view, failed to represent the realities of living in a "multi-cultural society" where persons of different ethnicities interact on a daily basis (Ross, 2001, p. 6). Therefore, they also believed that productions intentionally excluded ethnic characters from programs or

scenes when they would have an obvious presence in similar real life situations and geographic areas (Ross, 2001).

According to Ross, African American and Asian viewers reiterated this perspective in their discussions of ethnic/racial characterizations in British television programs. They had a particular problem with fictional characters that were not “integrated into the community they inhabit” (Ross, 2001, p. 6). This portrayal seemed unrealistic. And in their view, it relegated ethnic characters to a peripheral position. It was also important for viewers to see decorations or symbols in characters’ homes that signified their identification with their culture. Things like the characters’ names and the foods they ate were important to their perceptions of the authenticity of the characters (Ross, 2001). They articulated dissatisfaction with the infrequency with which productions showed characters interacting with their family members. They identified interactions with family members as an important way to add depth to characters that were in their view all too often one-dimensional. They were also dissatisfied with ethnic characters that typically had “something distinctive” or “deviant” that prevented them from having a reoccurring role in programs (Ross, 2001, p. 8). Along the same lines, participants believed that narratives should include issues like discrimination and racism, to encourage needed public discourse. However, the participants assumed that most mainstream writers were socially disconnected from minorities, and had no real interest in learning about their social identities (Ross, 2001).

Directions for Further Research

Even though Ross’ study participants were responding to characterizations in British television programs, their responses were similar to the informants for this field

study. This indicates the need for further research to examine the extent of the commonalities in minority viewers' receptions in different settings; and if commonalities exist, what this might reveal about television production cultures.

Actors' performances of accents and second languages could be important to other viewers' cultural believability appraisals. A Nigerian American friend once commented about an African American actor's poor performance of a Nigerian accent in the film *Barbershop*. In addition to authentic accents there were other recommendations that emerged during this field study that are worthy of further investigations. My informants indicated that they preferred television producers use believable yet subtle identity cues, mainly, incorporating Spanish in dialogues, food, artwork and other cultural symbols that express characters pride in their Latino heritage. It was difficult to determine what constituted subtle and overt cultural identifiers, particularly for comedies. Further studies are needed to explore these distinctions in viewers' appraisals. Researchers, casting professions, producers and writers should also consider whether a character's physical appearance clearly communicates their Latino identity. Viewers look for clues other than phenotypes to determine whether a character is Latino (Ríos, 2000).

Given the qualitative approach of this study, my intention was to give voice to my informants' perceptions, while still recognizing the limitations of the study's design and findings. The informants for this study were primarily second and third generation Mexican-American bilingual persons who lived in the Los Angeles area. The fact that television programs more often depict their communities was a consideration in the planning of this field study. This dimension of their believability appraisals was advantageous for exploring matters of believability. However, viewers who live in

geographic areas rarely depicted on television could interpret the believability of fictional television setting differently. Presumably, Latino viewers in other locations would prefer watching depictions of their communities. One informant who grew up in El Paso, Texas was very attentive to variations in regional accents. He enjoyed watching two nameless characters in the film *Selena* accurately perform an El Paso accent. Viewers who are less accustomed to watching depictions of their communities may demonstrate attention to different cultural signifiers, and may perhaps exhibit greater involvement when watching such portrayals. Furthermore, viewers who live in less Spanish rich environments and have a lower level of Spanish proficiency might not be as attentive to language use in their believability appraisals.

While the viewers who participated in this study overwhelmingly agreed on the aspects of characterizations that lacked cultural believability in English-language television programs, in accordance with qualitative approaches, determining whether their views were representative of other Mexican American and Salvadorian American viewers is beyond the scope of this project. The contributions of this research stem from the exploratory nature of the research, considering the lack of studies investigating aspects of believability pertaining to ethnic minority characters, namely Latinos.

Because few Latino characters were included in English language television programs, viewers did not have many characters to reference for their believability assessments. The homogeneity of their responses was likely due to the lack of representations, the need for diverse portrayals and the larger discourse concerning Latino portrayals in the popular press. In a more diverse television world, generational and experiential differences would have been more evident.

Nationality differences are an important issue with regard to Spanish language television representations (see Aguirre & Bustamante, 1993; Dávila, 2000a; Dávila, 2000b; Barrera, & Bielby, 2001; Greenberg, Burgoon, Burgoon & Korzenny, 1983; Mayer, 2001). Therefore, further differentiations of Latino identities in English language programs variations will likely reveal more differences in cultural believability based on the heritage nationality of the character and viewer. However, viewers' awareness that the industry conceptualizes Latino viewers as one demographic group contributed to their identification with characters of other heritage nationalities. Salvadorian American viewers identified with some Mexican American characters, for instance. Future research might also explore viewers' perceptions of the cultural believability of fictional characters in Spanish language television, and now in, Spanish-English bilingual networks.

While many scholarly critiques of television representations exist, it is important to investigate ways forward, which I have attempted to do in this field study. Viewers, who participate in academic research, do so to express their opinions to industry professionals. To honor this desire, I plan to pursue avenues to share the findings of this field study with industry professionals through publications, and by meeting and working with industry professionals.

Because this type of qualitative project requires extensive time, people in the industry tend to shy away from such research endeavors. Naturalistic qualitative studies, such as this dissertation research, provide descriptive accounts of viewers' receptions that quantitative methods do not yield. Therefore, I assume industry professionals will have an interest in the findings of this field study, considering the ongoing discourse about

Latino portrayals in the industry, in the popular press and among viewers and academics. Beyond engaging in a discourse with industry professionals about matters of cultural believability in the reception process, I have an interest in further investigating the influence industry cultures have on character development. Because of the social relevance of the cultural believability of fictional Latino portrayals, I plan to further investigate this topic in future studies, and hope this research will prompt other researchers to explore matters of cultural believability.

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INDEX OF TV PROGRAMS AND FILMS

Actors' Studio, 180

A Day Without A Mexican, 125,127

Sergio Arau, 125-126, 127

A Different World, 114, 184-185

Dwayne Wayne, 184

Freddie, 184

Jalessa, 185

Ron, 184

Whitley, 184

American Family, 59, 79-80, 95, 97, 99, 103, 110-114, 150

Cisco Gonzalez, 112

Esai Morales, 59

Esteban Gonzalez, 113

Berta Gonzalez, 99, 103

Jess Gonzalez, 99, 112

Nina Gonzalez, 112-113

Andy García (Andres García), 148

Antonio Banderas, 61

Barbershop, 187

Benjamin Bratt, 107, 146-147, 161

Beverly Hills 90210, 72, 77-78, 106-108

Brandon, 106-107

Nat, 109

Cameron Diaz, 141-145

Charlie Sheen (Estevez), 142, 144

Constance Maria, 63, 112-113

Desperate Housewives, 20, 69, 104

Carlos Solis, 104

Gabrielle “Gaby” Solis, 20, 69, 104

Dora the Explorer, 159

E News, 180

Entertainment Tonight, 180

E.R., 69, 183

Eva Longoria Parker, 63

Everybody Loves Raymond, 137-138, 182-183

Brad Garrett, 137

Claudia Heaton, 137

Debra Barone, 137-138

Doris Roberts, 137

Marie Barone, 137-138

Peter Boyle, 137

Ray Barone, 137-138

Ray Romano, 137-138

George Lopez

Angie Lopez, 61-62, 97

Benny Lopez, 103-104, 126-127

Carmen Lopez, 61-62

George Lopez (actor), 61-63, 83-84, 97-99, 103-104, 126-130, 145

George Lopez (show), 61-63, 84, 97-99, 104, 126-129

Masiela Lusha, 61-62

Grey's Anatomy, 13

Gwyneth Paltro, 57

Howard Stern, 123

I Love Lucy, 182-183

 Desi Arnez, 183

 Lucy Arnez, 183

Jessica Alba, 63, 147

L.A. Law, 183

Law & Order, 13, 107, 161-162, 183

 Reynaldo "Rey" Curtis, 161-162

Lost, 163

 Daniel Dae Kim, 163

 Jin-Soo Kwon, 163

 Sun Kwon, 163

 Yun-jin Kim, 163

Love Inc., 72-77, 140

 Clea, 74

 Francine, 74

Holly Robinson Peete, 73, 74

Ion Overman, 73-76

Reagan Gomez-Preston, 74

Viviana, 73-77

Martin Sheen (Ramon Antonio Gerard Estevez), 142, 144, 148

Matlock, 69

Maya & Miguel, 162-163

 Maya, 162

 Miguel, 162

Medium, 146

 Manuel Devalos, 146

 Miguel Sandoval, 146

Mind of Mencia, 122-125, 129

 Carlos Mencia, 122-125

My Big Fat Greek Wedding, 114-116

Oscar de la Hoya, 142

Over There, 79-80

Passions, 166-167

 Teresa Lopez-Fitzgerald, 166-167

 Pilar Lopez-Fitzgerald, 166-167

Penelope Cruz, 61

Perry Mason, 69

Real Women Have Curves, 114-116,

Renee Zellweger, 57

Resurrection Blvd., 55-56, 97, 99

Roseanne, 182

Salma Hayek, 72, 145, 147

Saturday Night Live, 142

Scrubs, 139-141, 164-165

 Donald Faison, 140

 Dr. Christopher Turk, 140

 Judy Reyes, 139-141

 Nurse Carla Espinosa, 139-140, 164

Selena, 56-57, 188

 Selena Quintanilla-Perez, 56

Side Order of Life, 148-149, 163-164

 Vivy Porter, 148-149, 163-164

Spanglish, 92

Star Trek, 18

 Borg queen, 18

 Spock, 18

 Warf, 18

Survivor, 16

Temptation Island, 16

The Cosby Show, 149-150, 176, 183

The Daily 10, 180

The E True Hollywood Story, 180

The Wonder Years, 84-85

Will & Grace, 60-61, 119-121,182

Karen, 119-121

Rosario, 60-61, 119-121

Shelley Morrison, 60-61

APPENDIX A: LIST OF INFORMANTS

Table 1.

List of Informants

| <u>Name</u> | <u>Age</u> | <u>Heritage Nationality</u> | <u>Generation</u> | <u>Bilingual</u> | <u>Education</u> | <u>Profession</u> |
|-------------|------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Anna | 20-30 | Mexican | Second | Yes | ** | Nursing Home Aid |
| Andrés | 19 | Mexican | Third | ** | High School | ** |
| Andrés | 19 | Mexican | Third | ** | High School | ** |
| Andy | 25 | Mexican | Second | Yes | High School | Security Guard |
| Armando | 30-40 | Mexican | Second | Yes | Bachelor's | Graphic Designer |
| Belinda | 25-30 | Mexican | Second | Yes | Bachelor's+ | Administrative Assistant |
| Betty | 35-45 | Mexican | Third | Yes | High School | ** |
| Carla | 19 | Salvadorian | Second | Yes | College Student | Childcare Center Employee |
| Claudia | 38 | Mexican | 2.5 ¹⁵ | Yes | High School | Administrative Assistant |
| Dan | 18-25 | Mexican | Second | ** | High School | ** |
| Edberto | 32 | Mexican | Second | Yes | Bachelor's | Pharmaceutical Sales Representative |
| Elena | 33 | Mexican | Third | Yes | Bachelor's | Social Worker |
| Elizabeth | 30-40 | Mexican | 1.5 ¹⁶ | Yes | Bachelor's+ | Teacher |
| Estelle | 66 | Mexican | Second | Yes | High School | Retired School Secretary |
| Eva | 30-40 | Mexican | Second | Yes | Bachelor's | **/Clown |
| Georgina | 30-35 | Mexican | Second | Yes | Bachelor's+ | Substitute Teacher |
| Guy1 | 18-25 | ** | Second | ** | ** | ** |
| Guy 2 | 18-25 | ** | Second | ** | ** | ** |

¹⁵ One of her parents was first-generation and one of her parents was second generation Mexican American.

¹⁶ Moved to the U.S. as a child

Table 1 (Continued)

| <u>Name</u> | <u>Age</u> | <u>Heritage Nationality</u> | <u>Generation</u> | <u>Bilingual</u> | <u>Education</u> | <u>Profession</u> |
|-------------|------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Guy 3 | 18-25 | ** | Second | ** | ** | ** |
| Ileana | 25-30 | Mexican | Second | Yes | Master's Student | Teacher |
| Henry | 70 | Mexican | Second | Yes | High School | Retired School Janitor |
| Jackie | 25-30 | Mexican | 1.5 | Yes | Master's Student | Teacher |
| Javier | 25-35 | Salvadorian/Mexican | Second | Yes | College Student | BMV Employee |
| José | 24 | Mexican | Second | Yes | College Student | ** |
| Louisa | 30-40 | Mexican | Second | Yes | High School | ** |
| Luis | 21-30 | Mexican | Second | ** | Bachelor's | ** |
| Melinda | 35-45 | Mexican | Second | ** | High School | ** |
| Michael | 17-22 | Mexican | Third | Yes | ** | Grocery Salesclerk |
| Miguel | 33 | Mexican | Second | Yes | Bachelor's | Junior Executive |
| Mona | 18-25 | Mexican | Second | Yes | High School | Daycare Worker |
| Regina | 31 | Mexican | Second | Yes | Ph.D. Student | Graduate Assistant |
| Rob | 20-30 | Mexican | Second | Yes | ** | Grocery Sales Clerk |
| Roger | 30-40 | Mexican | 1.5 | Yes | High School | Bus Driver |
| Ron | 18-25 | Mexican | Second | ** | High School | ** |
| Sam | 20 | Salvadorian | Second | ** | College Student | Public Library Employee |
| Tomás | 20-25 | Mexican | Second | Yes | High School+ | Police Officer |
| Vanessa | 19 | Mexican | Second | Yes | College Student | Childcare Center Employee |
| Victor | 17-22 | Mexican | Third | No | ** | Barista |
| Woman 1 | 25-35 | Mexican | Second | ** | ** | ** |

** unknown, +took additional educational courses for certification or job training