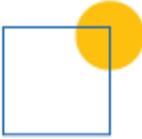




THE BLUEPRINT

Virtual Town Hall



Perceptions of Black Fathers in the Media

The Blueprint Virtual Town Hall

September 29, 2020

Transcript

Speaker: Dr. Janice Kelly

Dr. Janice Kelly ([00:00](#)):

Thank you, Kenneth and Fathers Incorporated for inviting me tonight to talk about media representation of fathers. I've been interested in this topic for quite some time. As someone who grew up with The Cosby Show and just been interested in how people perceive just black family life, it became my calling to analyze and talk about those images. I remember growing up having my friends, when we used to watch The Cosby Show together, many of them wanted that kind of lifestyle. Many of them thought, in terms of comparison, that their family was less off in comparison to The Cosby Show. I didn't have the understanding and training to really measure that. But as I went through college, I became more interested in what television was telling us as a black family, our norms and our values, and our way of life. And then I realized I needed to dive into the subject matter and begin to analyze it further.

Dr. Janice Kelly ([01:37](#)):

I also got into fatherhood, and I always try to explain this to people, because I was teaching a intro to psychology class and we were talking about parenting. This young man stood up in class, and he was talking about how he didn't grow up with his father and he was soon to be a father. He was pulling from television shows, whether it was Family Matters, The Cosby Show, or so many others. And it got me interested again about the representation of fathers and how powerful it is. And so today I want to talk about three elements as we analyze family; history, children's perceptions, images and themes, and lastly changes.

Dr. Janice Kelly ([02:29](#)):

Television or the media along with the study or various studies, one particular one, the 1965 Moynihan Report, had created a reality for many who did not live in the black community about the dominant image of the father. Now, there's a lot of research about slavery and it's impact to the black family, but that Moynihan Report had an impact on how writers, developers of media thought about the black family. They created this dominant image of the black family being that there was a single mother and children and a absent father. That absent father, when the media created the storyline of this absence, there is no justification for it. That was problematic in many ways, and we'll talk about it when we get to themes. But we started to see shows, particularly in 1968, the



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first black family show, Julia, where you have a widowed, black woman raising a child and working outside of the home. You get a sense that there is no memory about the father, that there's no discussion about the father. And so this is problematic all around that the father is missing.

Dr. Janice Kelly ([04:10](#)):

Followed by that was in the 1970s, shows like That's My Mama and What's Happening!! and again, single parent with children, no discussion whatsoever about the father or where the father is. Are they widowed? So there's really this gap and acceptability that fathers were insignificant to the development of the family, that mothers had no contact with the fathers. And then something happened in the 1970s, and that was Moynihan. Again, he will say to you, if you ever hear his discussion, that he borrowed a lot of what he thought that black family life was about through social science, scientists talking about the black family. So here comes the Moynihan Report again talking about the framework and the structure of the black family, that mother is working and that she is a single mother, and that that is the dominant framework of the family.

Dr. Janice Kelly ([05:23](#)):

Here's my concern, right, children are watching. We do know that 96% of the American families have television, 69% have cable. But we also know based on Nelson Report that between the ages of two and 12, children watch and they get something called schemata, images of what they think is the norm. And when they're watching these shows, they begin to learn about family life. They begin to get attitudes, beliefs, value systems based on what they are watching. And so when they are watching frequently, we call this cultivation hypothesis, when we are watching frequently certain shows that norm their perceptions of family life, this is something of interest to us and the culture in general. Marshall McLuhan once wrote, "The media influences how people think and believe." I think about this episode in Everyone Hates Chris, where Chris is talking about his father to his teacher, and the teacher pauses the conversation and says, "Wait a minute, Chris. You have a father?"

Dr. Janice Kelly ([06:39](#)):

This is what we're talking about in terms of these images and beliefs. But one of the frameworks I think is important to talk about is how they write about the black family and the black father. It is described that writers for black family shows use this particularly dominant framework where the father is the traditional breadwinner and the mother is the homemaker. They use this framework... You see this in Good Times, right? The father goes out for employment and the mother stays home to take care of the children. But here's the problem with that framework, it's not the black framework. We know that both mother and father work, mother and father have a partnership to take care of the children. And yet when you do see this dominant framework, this traditional Western framework of the breadwinner and the homemaker, it doesn't work for the black family.

Dr. Janice Kelly ([07:49](#)):

And so when you look at Good Times and you look at Everyone Hates Chris, they become a working class family.



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Yet, when you have the partnership where the husband and wife both work, you have the kind of family like the Cosby's. So we do see this. But during the earlier days of television, they had this traditional breadwinner, homemaker structure but they were able to survive in a middle class structure. This is not, again, the case for the black family. And yet when you use the structure of the breadwinner and the homemaker, issues of the black father's competency come into play, his occupation comes into play. There are elements that can either help or hurt children who are watching and learning about black family life as well as the black father.

Dr. Janice Kelly ([08:48](#)):

And so this model of the traditional breadwinner and homemaker has never suited the black family, and yet when you look at black family life through the lens of television, they like to use it. This becomes a problem because, again, it's whose stories are being told but who's writing these stories. The homemaker, breadwinner also leaves the issue of maleness or masculinity at play in the issue of competency. And so Julius Drew, who is the father in Everyone Loves Chris, works two jobs, does the best for his family. And so does James Evans. But when you look at it from the lens of capitalism, then in play is the competency of this father based on his occupation, which is blue collar.

Dr. Janice Kelly ([09:49](#)):

One of the things I'm also noticing when you look at these shows is the issue of the disappearance of the working class family, and that has been happening since the nineties. It's really a problematic situation because we learn so much from the working class father. We learn about issues that we don't hear enough in middle-class family life. Now, I give kudos to Black-ish, but when you talk about stagnant wages, when you talk about the lack of security and care for your children, you hear it through the lens of working class family life. The disappearance of the working class black father, talking about the struggles and the type of ways that they repair family situations or their masculinity in these situations has disappeared. So now we get this false narrative about black family life in terms of only middle-class or upper middle-class discussions. But fathers in working-class family life talk about fears of their sons playing outside, whether it's because of the safety and security of gang life or police. I mean, these are absent because we have moved away from working-class family life, and fathers having real stories.

Dr. Janice Kelly ([11:14](#)):

There's a beautiful episode in Good Times where James Evan talks about the returning of meeting his father after years of absence. You don't see that, right? When Julius is talking about working two jobs and having high blood pressure, you don't hear them. And so these stories that deal with, even if it's for a fragment of a moment, talking about real situations of what it means to be a blue collar worker, loving one's family, doing all that they can for their family is important for storytelling. And when you ask, where are these stories being told on network television? They're not, right? What we're watching right now is buffoonery and silliness in many general family shows. But when you go back into the yesteryear of the catalog of fathers, Good Times, Family



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Matters, Roc you know, you're missing themes that are no longer discussed. But this goes back to my cultivation hypothesis, that kids who are watching are learning also survival stories, sometimes stories that are never been told to them. But they learn it from watching these shows.

Dr. Janice Kelly ([12:33](#)):

And so themes are important to many of these families. I wanted to go into just some other things that issues of masculinity that's talked about in Roc, standing up to gang members, discussed in Roc. I understand these are '80s and '90s shows, but I'm looking at themes, and I'm looking at how we saw the integrity and value system and morality of these fathers who had voice and presence in communities. And so when you talk about why they are no longer around, well, here comes the major issue, who's writing the stories? Who has a voice? I think a lot of the black community embraced Love Hair because it was a father who was doing hair for his daughter. It was showing, again, the engagement and the tenderness and the empathy and the tenderness that he had for his daughter. We're missing it, and I think we're hungry about these images, because we know that they exist in real time.

Dr. Janice Kelly ([13:51](#)):

But all is not lost. I see a transformation happening. I see a movement happening. That movement is fathers are no longer allowing others to write stories about their situations, about their experiences. But we see this in the Gillette commercials. We see this in diaper commercials. We're seeing this in the Oreo commercial. We're seeing changes that are happening where fathers are riding in. We're seeing new blogs than ever before, podcasting that is increasing over the years where fathers want to take to the mic and talk, particularly black fathers, and correct some of the images that are happening or appearing on television.

Dr. Janice Kelly ([14:39](#)):

The fight is happening. The more that they are becoming vocal, they're changing advertisers, they're changing television shows. Transformation is happening because black fathers are becoming more vocal. We know that they're involved. We know that they have more of an engagement in school and family life, in church. They are taking up ways to make sure that the media, that television, that movies write them in in ways that do justice to all of their dedication and family life. Thank you, thank you for listening to me today.

