A Surprising Racial Twist: Racialized Discourse in Media Coverage of COVID-19

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Abstract

COVID-19 has been shown to disproportionately affect BIPOC communities, and media has covered a variety of possible reasons for this phenomenon. However, most media use problematic language that is consistent with racialization of illness and color-blind racial frames that constructs COVID-19 as a highly racialized virus. Racialization of COVID-19 allows for pre-existing health conditions to be naturalized by erasing the structural systems which produce those health outcomes. Racialization also occurs with data and statistics that do not account for human experience nor for racist social systems. Utilizing an ethnographic content analysis, this study examines the ways in which media deploy language such that people of color are constructed as inherently diseased or susceptible to illness.

Research Questions

- How do media about COVID-19 contribute to racializing inequalities?

- What discourses are used in these constructions?

- What might a reader takeaway from pieces utilizing these discourses?

Background & Literature

- •Within the U.S. Black, Indigenous, Latinx/Hispanic communities have disproportionate rates of cases and deaths due to COVID-19 (Williams, 2020)

- Inequality contributes to the high rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths (Fischer & Bubola, 2020)

- Past illnesses have been racialized (Briggs, 2005; Guenter, 2016)

- Bonilla-Silva's theory on color-blind racial frames,
  - "The central component of any dominant racial ideology is its frames or set paths for interpreting information... by definition dominant frames must *mis*represent the world (hide the fact of dominance" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p.74)

Method

- Ethnographic content analysis

- 62 articles were randomly selected for content analysis

- A wide range of written content was included in the sample

Results

- Some media did use color-blind racist frames, primarily naturalization

- Several articles only mention pre-existing health conditions as a reason for COVID-19's effects on BIPOCs

- Articles that listed other factors such as systematic forms of racism tended to loop back to health conditions as a cause

Discussion

- Centering pre-existing health conditions continues discourse that labels bodies of color as diseased or inherently susceptible to illness.

- Race data about might contribute to the process of racialization.

- Race data exposes current inequalities that must be addressed.

Conclusion

- The media covering COVID-19 does use racialized frames that naturalize BIPOCs as inherently susceptible to illness

- Centering pre-existing health conditions leads to erasure of factors which contribute to health

- Centering health conditions can lead a reader to believe there are biological reasons that COVID-19 effects BIPOC populations at higher rates instead of systematic effects

Looking Forward

- Future research should focus on a wider scale of articles from throughout the pandemic.

- Data collection in the future must have consistent measurements and not naturalize inequalities

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