On Sunday March 18, 2015, the Cable News Network (CNN) reported a racial atrocity in Falls Church, Virginia. During a lesson on stereotypes a white teacher pressed a black student—in a predominantly white class—reading a poem by Langston Hughes to read “blacker.” The teacher’s remarks were completely uncalled for but the real injustice was on the part of the popular media outlet. In reporting the story, CNN described the boy as “complaining about the teacher’s insensitive remarks.” In any context complain is not often thought of as a positive word. In fact when people are described as complaining they are often thought of in a negative manner, usually as being whiny, hypersensitive, or troublesome. The small decision to use the word complain rather than a more appropriate phrase like speaks out is just one of the many ways the media subtly influences public perception. Another way is in the representation of certain groups of people. The Beauty Bias: The Injustices of Appearance in Life and Law written by Deborah L. Rhode establishes that “people thought to be less attractive are appointed characteristics considered negative compared to traits associated to their more attractive counterparts like dishonesty, unkindness and malevolence.” The media’s lack of representation of black people shown as being attractive compared to other groups of people (an example being a simulation of the most attractive man and women in the world released to the public where both the man and the woman were white people with white features) only aids the persistence of thoughts that black individuals, specifically black males possess the negative traits Rhodes
describes. This belief affects not only the way we see black males but also the way they are treated in this society. Some people stand to benefit from these negative stereotypes, many of whom aren’t even aware of their privilege. David Ikard’s account in his book *Blinded by Whites: Why Race Still Matters in 21st-Century America* distinguishes “popular race attitude held by whites vs. actual racial progression” (8). Ikard also establishes the false notion that racism and prejudice don’t exist “but rather the white supremacists ideology has been updated so that black people suffer in ways such as economic inequality, racial profiling, and law targeting instead of outright means of racism and prejudice” (8). Derald Wing Sue implies within the title of his book *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race* that dialogues about race aren’t happening but this isn’t true. Dialogue between races are happening everywhere especially in the media in a way that most people don’t recognize. The real question isn’t whether the dialogue is happening or if it has the affect we think it does but whether the influence on our developed implicit biases are intentional and/or preventable.

**Academic Conversations**

In my research, I have found a lack of sources regarding the way that the media subtly perpetuates certain ideas about black men and the prejudice they experience as a result. Any source that I have found that even mentions the media’s impact on the public’s perspective of black men follows the likes of bell hooks’ *Black Looks: Race and Representation* in that they speak primarily about the causes, impact, and problems of white supremacy rather than about the thoughts and feelings of the oppressed, which are black men. However her remarks do provide some insight into my topic; she brings attention to the portrayal of black individuals in the media, which “reinforce and reinscribe the ideals of white supremacy” (hooks n.p.). hooks’ assertion is made meaningful in regards to my topic when her considerations of the
responsibilities of both black and white individuals are contemplated. She references white people who have not yet “divested racism” (hooks n.p.) and the black people who have “internalized white supremacy” (hooks n.p.) both of whom take part in producing the media that influences prejudice viewpoints.

My difficulty in finding sources about the media’s impact on the public perception of black men prompted me to shift my focus to different aspects that influence and are in many ways influenced by the media’s portrayal of black men in the media. Surprisingly a lot of unexpected disciplines are involved in the conversation albeit not always directly. Academics such as historians for example speak largely about slavery. This recounting is generally coupled with an economist’s perspective of financial benefit on the part of privileged whites. In Yoram Barzel’s “An Economic Analysis of Slavery” he provides sufficient reasoning as to present-day perceptions of black men. During the time period in which American Negro slavery was active, slaves in many ways were thought to be stronger, and more durable than their white counterparts. Barzel explains “personal labor (by white men) evokes concern for profit as well as leisure or time for rest.” He then goes on to state, “slave-labor differs in that the concern for the well-being of slaves is considered but not as big of a priority in comparison to the profit to be made off of them” (Barzel, “An Economic Analysis of Slavery”). This translates to present day perceptions of black individuals, specifically black men being more equipped to handle trying experiences and thus being treated to some degree as superhuman, as in the cases when African American children are treated as adults capable of dealing with trials and obstacles maturely and being held to the same level of accountability as adults despite still being children. The media’s depiction of black men in a strong and dominant light, an example being in films and motion pictures when they are shown as slaves overthrowing a system built to oppress them or as young men living in
what can be thought to be less than endurable circumstances but still managing to survive, only further perpetuates this belief. Very few, if any literary sources discuss the sole benefits of whites from an economist’s point of view though benefits do exist. This is evident in the apportioning of jobs, money, and education between whites and blacks in America. Though I have no justification for the lack of literary sources pertaining to present-day economists’ view on media and black men, I do pose a relevant question in response: If negative public perception of black men serve to benefit the media (both white people and privileged black people), is media bias intentional?

This question is not important from merely an economic standpoint. Academics in the fields of law and politics reference the relevance of this idea. Justin D. Levinson and Robert J. Smith acknowledge “misconceptions about living in a post-racial society despite racial disparities in Implicit Racial Bias Across the Law. Levinson and Smith mention economic imbalances previously mentioned like “economic advancement and property ownership” while adding a new element of disparity: the “criminal justice system.” According to Levinson and Smith “African Americans make up 13 percent of the population yet account for 50% of incarcerations in the United States” (Levinson and Smith 1). What is even more interesting about this fact is that Levinson and Smith account for it “not being the result of old thoughts about racism but a new, deeper system largely reliant on implicit bias that converges on society and the legal system” (Levinson and Smith 2). As seen in the opening of Perry L. Moriearty’s “Framing Justice: Media, Bias, and Legal Decisionmaking” everyone is susceptible to the effects of media influence even those with power to significantly alter the lives of others. Therefore this representation of black individuals has been “battled” for according to Shirley Moody-Turner’s Black Folklore and the Politics of Racial Representation. As stated before negative perception of
black men is the responsibility of black people with influence as much as it is the responsibility of white people with influence. Black people experience blackness first hand so their representation of black people is seen as a representation of themselves and black people as a whole and in a lot of cases seen as more reliable than a white person’s account because of what is thought to be firsthand knowledge. So this again begs the question from a different perspective: If people understand the power and influence they yield over others, is media bias intentional?

Psychologists as well as Linguists are in pursuit of this question. A piece like Lincoln Quillian’s “Does Unconscious Racism Exist...” seeks to answer this question implying some type of “uncertainty” within the title. On the other hand works like Jean Moule’s “Understanding Unconscious Bias and Unintentional Racism” and Luce Irigaray’s To Speak is Never Neutral make claims within their titles that implicit bias is “not intentional but the product of complex psychological processes that cannot be prevented” (Irigaray n.p.). In her book, Irigaray explicitly states that “language is rarely neutral, and while it can be an informative, nourishing, liberating, and effective aid for those versed well enough to use it, language also functions as a toxin that can imprison, cut off, and poison” (Irigaray 4). This affirmation in conjunction with Ikard’s analysis of black individuals’ portrayal in media outlets only further emphasizes the relevance of implicit bias. Ikard recalls a Jewish literary and social critic by the name of Irving Howe who has been “brainwashed by mass media to believe that black people lack the complexity of characters like the protagonists in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man to the point that he dismisses the protagonist as being unbelievable” (Ikard 133). Ikard continues saying “Howe’s bias has led him to believe that white people possess a kind of complexity that black’s don’t and that black men who are always on the verge of violent outbreaks are obsessed with white oppression which
gives Howe the confidence to assert that his assessment of the black condition is more qualified than that of Ellison—an actual black man” (Ikard 133). In actuality Howe just calls the book’s tempo “too feverish to the point of being hysterical” and Ellison’s writing overwhelming (Howe, “Irving Howe and Invisible Man”) which is a little less ruthless than Ikard’s interpretation.

Ikard’s evaluation though a little dramatized corroborates hook’s claim that the media reinforces white supremacy. Furthermore, writers and others involved in the portrayal of black people in a negative light through the media benefit from Howe’s biased ideas about black people in that his type of thinking gives claim to other stereotypical views of black men. Different aspects of the media’s influence on the public perception of black men impact the public’s perception to varying degrees which at some point then in turn impacts what is put in the media but it is fair to claim that in many ways, what is put in the media and what is perceived influences each other in a manner so complex that it wouldn’t be absurd to believe implicit bias is a problem too intricate to even resolve.

A Closer Look at Psychology and the Justice System

I am choosing to closely analyze Lynne M. Jackson’s *The Psychology of Prejudice* and Perry L. Moriearty’s “Framing Justice: Media, Bias, and Legal Decisionmaking” because alone they both offer insight into implicit bias but supplement each other in a way that provides a more detailed account of implicit bias and its origins. Jackson’s book explores the reason behind why people feel the way they feel and do the things they do despite the impact their actions and influence has on others. It also leads to the question of whether people (the media, courts…etc) are even aware that they are being prejudice and subsequently whether there are any ways to prevent the unjust treatment people receive because of the influence they have on them.

Moriearty’s article gives real life examples of why prejudice (whether conscious or not) matters
and how it effects black men in real life. It also is the best example of how no one is truly immune from the effects of subtle influence, which ties back into Jackson’s account of the psychology of people. Finally every subtopic mentioned thus far can be described from either a psychology or legal perspective so together they encompass every aspect of the academic conversation.

Lynne M. Jackson speaks to various possible psychological causes of developed racism in *The Psychology of Prejudice*, but one that is very interesting is an experiment she recalled that involved six boys at a camp and how prejudice develops in children. In the experiment the boys were allowed to consort among themselves and overtime built friendships within the group. After connections between the boys were made, the boys were split into groups where they still fraternized with members of the other group but were more loyal to their own. In the next phase of the experiment, the boys were put in competition against one another and an instant animosity developed between the groups and the boys were found to see themselves with an ‘us vs. them’ mentality. Even when efforts were made to eradicate the tension between the two groups, the boys’ intergroup relationships were never the same. Jackson’s experiment qualifies the idea that “relationships (and therefore prejudice) are not the result of common interests or general beliefs but sameness” (104). The Social Theory of Identity states that people like to feel good about who they are and being surrounded by similar people helps achieve this because self-identity rules self-concept. In this context sameness as it pertains to self-concept can be interpreted as predictability as a way to validate existence. That which is foreign or unknown cannot be controlled or anticipated because imagination is limited to experience. This lack of foresight when dealing with foreign people elicits fear of a loss of power and self-perception. To praise those that are like one’s self is to naturally praise one’s self whereas praising someone
significantly different does nothing to aid a person’s self-perception and may even cause harm to a person’s self-esteem. The media’s positive portrayal of white people allows the Social Theory of Identity to thrive based on appearance and frequent representation (the Social Theory of Identity also applies to complacent blacks but is based on class and ideology rather than appearance). Jackson describes fear of the loss of power as being the result of a “competition of scarce resources, which is ever-present in our society” (105). These scarce resources are jobs, money, education, and privilege therefore this competition can be interpreted as a struggle over wealth, advantage, and ultimately power. So the biases that people project onto others may not be to intentionally harm others but to benefit themselves.

Perry L. Moriearty’s “Framing Justice: Media, Bias and Legal Decisionmaking” tells a different story when a prosecutor chooses to charge a fifteen-year old African American with Strong-Arm Robbery for stealing $2 from another child at school after seeing a news report about an African American male who killed a seventeen-year old child. In this case the story seems to be about prejudice but is alluded to being about the media as supported by Moriearty’s statement that “[s]ocial cognition theory…suggest that the news story could have easily played a role” (883). In this case the media serves not only as a source of influence but a source by which the justice system influences and is judged. Moriearty explains, “the roles of legal scholars and politicians converge meaning that employees of the legal system must not only work to uphold the law but also satisfy those that give them their positions” (884). This suggests that the prejudice prevalent in the justice system is not about prejudice at all but about how the public and political powers perceive how well justice is served. Moriearty cites a piece by David Pritchard *Homicide and Bargained Justice: The Agenda-Setting Effect of Crime News on Prosecutors* that states prosecutors “project an image that they are holding youth accountable to
their offenses and that justice [is] being served” (qtd. in Pritchard). Rather than actually focusing on “upholding” justice the workers within the justice system condemn everyone in an effort to appear as if the system is being meticulous. Moriearty quotes Pritchard again in saying “Defense attorneys get by going along with everyone else because they have the weakest influence in the courthouse while having the most stigmas attached to clients” (qtd. in Pritchard) which implies that like defense attorneys, the justice is not a system of adamant hunters of justice but vigilantes working in their own interest of self preservation.

What is most interesting about Jackson and Moriearty’s work is that they in someway allude to a belief that the means by which people operate are solely in the interest of self-preservation rather than to oppress others but this may be a mistake in judgment. The biggest point for me in Moriearty’s article is the distinction between the ways things are and the way they seem to be. Moriearty describes the justice system in a way that depicts it as a media pleasing entity rather than a justice serving one. So the justice system works with the intent to satisfy the public via the media, which means wrongfully convicting African American men opposed to fairly punishing those that deserve it. In many regards this does benefit the system because it can continue making money off of the imprisonment and fear of African American men; however it is misguided to think that anyone is honestly not being negatively affected by the prejudice in today’s society. In Peggy MacIntosh’s “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” she states that as a white person “[she] can freely disparage fear, neglect, and be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms,” which implies that non-white people such as African America men cannot. Jackson describes foreign people as being something to fear and MacIntosh describes non-white people as not being able to disparage the fear so both black people as well as white people are described as being fearful of each other and
feared themselves. So is anyone really benefiting from prejudice, if it is built on fear that translates to a misunderstanding of that which is different? I think not, just as the justice system thinks it benefits from public satisfaction and the trust of the majority but is really inciting fear and hatred in oppressed people who began to distrust the system and rebel against it, people who act in prejudice ways to benefit themselves are really putting themselves at a disadvantage. “The ability to be with those like one self more often than not and remain oblivious to other people’s way of life” (MacIntosh n.p.) rears a sense of comfort that is not always present in our diverse and multiethnic world and gives people the false sense of superiority, whether they recognize it or not. And this superiority can deprive people of the ability to actively engage in the world, which does cater to the few but is home to far more. With this in mind, the question of whether bias is intentional or not is less relevant in comparison to how people let the fear of anything different influence their understanding (or misunderstanding) of others. It is the misunderstanding of others that drove slave owners to work their slaves harder than they would themselves. And it is the misunderstanding of others that influence people to judge what is foreign to them. So while the media does have the power to reach a broader range of people than any one individual, the people involved cannot be held completely responsible for the content they broadcast because ultimately they are only perpetuating a misunderstanding that has been prominent in history since at least as far back as slavery.
Works Cited


Moriearty, Perry L. "Framing Justice: Media, Bias, And Legal Decisionmaking."

