

Should sociologists care about #OscarsSoWhite?



by Ronda Daniel – [@rondaemily_](#)

Image from Jada Pinkett-Smith's Facebook page, recording a video 'We must stand in our power', urging people of colour to boycott this year's Oscars awards ceremony. 18/01/2016.

Initially, when I saw #OscarsSoWhite trending, referring to the fact that none of the nominations for this year's Oscars feature performers of colour **for the second year running**, and responses from Spike Lee and Jada Pinkett-Smith who have chosen to boycott the awards ceremony, I viewed this as a *trivial, non-issue*. By 'trivial, non-issue', I originally thought of #OscarsSoWhite as an issue exclusive to the black elite in the USA. I asked myself: *'There are so many day-to-day issues that black Americans face – incarceration, poverty, housing, employment discrimination – why should sociologists care about the Oscars?'* However, I now realise this representation does not just have repercussions for the performers, but aspiring performers, and the ordinary, average black American.

Performers of colour

2015 saw a lot of films with people of colour in the lead role, for instance, *Straight Outta Compton*, *Creed*, amongst a number of films. Despite this, these films were completely overlooked in the Oscars nominations. *Straight Outta Compton*, which sold highly in the box offices in both the USA and UK for a number of weeks, and received an average of 81% from prestigious film critics, did receive some nominations; but not for the black performers, only the four white screenwriters. Popular responses to the fact that performers of colour were overlooked include 'other films with white leads were better', and the nominations are 'not racially motivated'; this perpetuates the idea that only white performers have talent. Not only does this marginalise performers of colour from being cast for lead roles, it also creates a genre of 'black films': the assumption that performers of colour 'fit' particular roles. For instance, fulfilling the stereotype of young black males as 'urban' and 'thuggish', or black women as 'sassy'.

Aspiring performers of colour

When aspiring performers of colour see that they do not have the same chance of being as successful as their white counterparts, this can demotivate them. Perhaps related to the fact that they do not fit the 'majority', 'white' beauty standards found in the mainstream media (see [Cosmopolitan, 2015](#)), performers of colour are highly likely to be cast in roles that 'fit' a particular category; for instance, films about slavery, rappers, lawbreakers, various historical struggles. By only 'fitting' these very specific roles, performers of colour are less likely to be depicted in the 'mainstream' media altogether. The *blackface* caricatures are still there; they have just modernised with the times, and people of colour are presented as inferior, both in terms of the characters they play, and in terms of talent recognised by performers. British actor Idris Elba, born in East London, [recounted yesterday](#) that 'Ford Dagenham was more diverse than the TV industry today'.

The ordinary, average black American

Doesn't the ordinary black American have more to worry about than which actors are nominated in the Oscars? Like police brutality, housing inequality, discrimination in the workplace? The way people of colour are portrayed in the media arguably influences these inequalities for the average black American, and sociologists should not overlook this. For instance, the depiction of young

black men as 'lazy', 'unemployed', and 'law-breaking' thugs perpetuates the idea that black incarceration rates are disproportionately high in America because 'black people commit more crime'. Sociologists do, and should, seek to dispel this myth, and reiterate that these stereotypes influence police behaviour, as well as attitudes of the general public, impacting on things such as housing and employment. As well as how people of colour are depicted, sociologists should also criticise the nominations, as they maintain the idea that white performers are nominated because they have more talent, legitimating white domination as 'natural' and society as 'meritocratic'.

The Black Panther: the first mainstream African-American superhero in film

Whilst there have been comic characters such as *Falcon* depicting superheroes of colour, Marvel are to release *The Black Panther* in 2018; the first mainstream African-American superhero in film. *Why is this important?* There are now a number of Disney Princesses of colour, such as Pocahontas, who is Native American, Jasmine who is 'Arabian', Mulan, who is Chinese, Tiana, who is black (set during the 'Jazz Age'), and Disney's first Polynesian princess Moana; these princesses, unlike the 'mainstream' white European princesses, give children, particularly young girls of colour (according to gendered stereotypes), a character to relate to in this mediated, consumerist society. Giving young boys a hero to aspire to is certainly more positive than the self-fulfilling prophecy that young black men are 'thugs'.

Overall, sociologists should care about #OscarsSoWhite. Sociologists should criticise both the representation of popular characters of colour in the media as well as the lack of representation in Oscar nominations. This is not just important for the performers to be recognised, but to stop reinforcing the idea that society is meritocratic and that white domination exists, especially in the context of the Oscars, because people of colour are less talented.

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