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An Upstander Is a Person in Your Neighborhood: Children, Sesame Street, and Race in 2020

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ABSTRACT

Educational children’s media, such as the program *Sesame Street*, may be the most accessible format for teaching young children about race and racism in the United States. Throughout its history, *Sesame Street* has attempted to confront racism through its diverse cast and, in the summer of 2020, by directly addressing the topic with children and families. However, both its passive representation and active discussion fall short of what is needed to confront systemic racism. This paper addresses *Sesame Street*’s past and present role as a leader in children’s educational media, and advocates that the program employ Critical Race Theory to evaluate how young children are taught about race.

INTRODUCTION

Along with conventional preschools, the television program *Sesame Street* has played a prominent role in educating young children since its creation over fifty years ago. Along with covering basic math and literacy, *Sesame Street* helps children and their families address difficult social and emotional topics, including the under-discussed complexities of race and racism. The show has long been considered a leader in showcasing racial diversity with its cast of adults and children. However, *Sesame Street* has openly discussed racism only twice: once in the 1993 episode “Racism on *Sesame Street*,” and again in the summer of 2020, when it began an initiative addressing racial injustice after the murder of George Floyd sparked a national wave of Black Lives Matter protests and action (*Racism on Sesame Street*, n.d.). Additionally, in contrast to the human cast, the Muppet cast struggles with diverse representation. As a trusted leader in children’s media, *Sesame Street*’s shortfalls in addressing racism shape perceptions of race, identity, and racism for millions of children nationwide. This paper will investigate *Sesame Street* using a Critical Race Theory lens to analyze how a central institution of children’s educational media unintentionally reinforces systems of whiteness in the United States, and suggests ways it can move from colorblind to color-conscious advocacy.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY, CRITICAL RACE THEORY, AND CHILDREN’S MEDIA

When considering how educational policies on race affect preschool-aged children, it is necessary to look outside of the traditional school system. In 2018, 68% of four-year-old and 40% of three-year-old children were enrolled in a preschool program, with white children and children of parents with graduate or professional degrees most likely to be enrolled (*Preschool and Kindergarten Enrollment*, 2020). Enrollment also differs between states, with 2017 data showing 33 out of 50 states falling below the 48.1% national average enrollment of three- and four-year-olds (*Percentage*

of 3- and 4-year-old children, 2019). Conversely, preschool-aged children are highly involved with television and other media. Currently, 90% of parents with children three to four years old state their child has access to a television, 64% to a tablet, and 62% to a smartphone (*Parenting Children in the Age of Screens*, 2020). The latter two devices are likely also used to watch video content, as 81% of the same parents state their child watches YouTube videos, and half of parents of children four or younger say their child watches YouTube daily (*Parenting Children in the Age of Screens*, 2020). Demographic patterns of YouTube viewership are the reverse of preschool enrollment, with parents with a high school education or less and Black and Hispanic parents most likely to say their child watches YouTube daily (*Parenting Children in the Age of Screens*, 2020). Additionally, television and video content is usually nationally uniform. While the ideal role for educational media can be debated, currently, educational policies targeting television and digital media may have greater and more equitable impacts on young children than policies targeting traditional schooling.

While too much screen time can negatively affect three- to five-year-old children, research shows well-designed educational TV shows can positively affect children’s cognitive, literacy, and social skills (COUNCIL ON COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA, 2016). The show *Sesame Street* is considered the gold standard of well-designed educational shows, as it is designed using educational theory and research and frequently analyzed for efficacy (Mielke 1990). Created in 1969 through a public-private collaboration, *Sesame Street* was the first research-based children’s show claiming the time children spent watching TV could teach them: its initial goal was remedying the difference in educational achievements between low-income “inner-city” children and their peers by making learning accessible and entertaining for young children before they started school (Tierney 1971). Research on the program’s immediate effects described its success preparing children as comparable to federally funded Head Start preschool programs, while requiring a fraction of the cost (Kearney & Levine, 2019). *Sesame Street* is now the longest-running American children’s television show, and

widely accessible through the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), subscription streaming services, YouTube, the program's website, and its free iOS app (*Our History*, n.d.; *Sesame Street*, n.d.). Analyzing where *Sesame Street's* policies fail to adequately address race illuminates how this foundational show reinforces dominant racial narratives.

"As a trusted leader in children's media, Sesame Street's shortfalls in addressing racism shape perceptions of race, identity, and racism for millions of children nationwide."

One lens to analyze how *Sesame Street* treats race is Critical Race Theory (CRT), originally derived from critiques of legal scholarship's approach to racial reform (Ladson-Billings, 2010). Daniel Solórzano (1998) defines five central themes of CRT as it applies to education. First is "the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism," considering race as central rather than secondary, and examining how it intersects with other hierarchies such as gender or class (Solórzano, 1998). Second is "the challenge to dominant ideology," such as challenging claims of objectivity or color blindness as in reality reinforcing the power of dominant groups; third is "the commitment to social justice," eliminating racism and other forms of subordination; fourth is "the centrality of experiential knowledge," highlighting the lived experiences of people of color as critical knowledge; and fifth is "the interdisciplinary perspective" (Solórzano, 1998). Applying a critical lens to children's media is important because children are likely to consume media uncritically, incorporating both explicit and implicit messages into their worldviews. CRT makes race the central axis of its analysis, removing the distinction between implicit and explicit messaging and exposing default, uncritical, or 'colorblind' thinking about race as reinforcing existing inequalities. Using these five themes exposes where *Sesame Street's* preconceptions about children and race interfere with their goals of social justice and antiracism.

Educational policy often fails in leading conversations about race, especially with young children. In preschools and elementary schools, teachers often feel unprepared or reluctant to discuss race, sometimes indicating lack of guidance as a reason (Vittrup 2016). Many parents also struggle with talking to their children about race and racism, thinking they are "too young" or that learning about these topics would destroy children's "innocence" (Husband 2010). This can lead to adults dismissing racist behavior in young children, attributing it to them not understanding what they are saying, parroting the racism of a parent, or just misbehaving (Winkler 2009).

However, many studies have found that young children, and even babies, are not in fact colorblind: they differentiate between races and behave differently according to perceptions of race (Winkler 2009). One study found that infants nonverbally distinguish people based on race and gender at six months old, and that this awareness likely begins even earlier (Katz & Kofkin 1997). Three- to five-

year-olds were found in multiple studies to categorize people by race and to express racial biases, and in one study to use race in determining their identity, the identity of others, and deciding which children to include or exclude from activities (Winkler 2009). Research has also shown that these behaviors are not solely the result of directly taught bias, but rather emerge due to children's observations and interpretations of the role race plays in society at all levels of daily life, including media representation (Winkler 2009). Using CRT and acknowledging this central role of race shows that rather than an issue better avoided, race is an essential educational topic that must explicitly combat the dominant societal messages already shaping children's thinking.

Currently, television and media representation may worsen existing societal biases in children. A study sampling TV programs airing in 2017 in the US and Canada for children 12 and under found that for all main characters, only 38% were female, and only 2% were characterized as coming from a "lower class" background (Lemish & Johnson 2019). In the U.S. shows, 65% of all human characters were white (Lemish & Johnson 2019). Showrunners also face diversity issues, with 71% of shows created solely by men, and writer's rooms characterized as "notorious for being filled with white men" (Lemish & Johnson 2019). These statistics illustrate the intersectional identities chronically sidelined in children's media.

The percentages above do not reflect the true demographics of children in the U.S. Recent data shows 49% of children ages 0-19 are female, only 51% of children under 18 are white, and 39% of children live in low-income families (*U.S. population 2020; Child trends 2018; United States Demographics*, 2018). This biased representation in children's show characters parallels the lack of representative teacher diversity in traditional school settings: as of 2016, 82% of US public school teachers were white (*State of Racial Diversity*, 2016). As with lack of representation in the real world, lack of representation in television has troubling implications. For instance, one study of elementary school children found watching television was related to higher self-esteem in white boys but lower self-esteem in white girls and all Black children, showing how these shows reinforce existing systems of privilege (Martins & Harrison 2012). The effect of media on children's lives is also not limited to time spent watching: children often heavily emotionally engage in their favorite shows, and may reference them in conversation or play with family, friends, and teachers.

When set against the often-extreme lack of diversity in children's programming, *Sesame Street* has again been a role model. The show was intentionally set on an urban street with a racially diverse human cast, and the diversity of identities represented has increased over the years, often in response to audience feedback (Harrington 2019; Lepore 2020). The trust given to *Sesame Street* for promoting diversity onscreen shows in the comments on the program's Instagram post declaring their intent to work against racism, amidst a wave of similar posts from various companies and organizations during the Black Lives Matter movement over the summer of 2020. Many commenters on the post, which has over 90,000 likes, said they remember the show as one of the few where they felt represented as children (sesamestreet 2020). However, the show focused on positively representing diverse characters, rather than engaging with the challenges of racism that even young chil-

dren may encounter, personally or through family or community connections. Additionally, keeping the Muppets ‘colorblind’ by refusing to associate them with racial identities or traits reveals a lack of depth to the show’s diversity. Due to its status and position as an educational program reaching millions of young children and their families, *Sesame Street* has a responsibility to critically evaluate how it portrays and discusses race, and to create and update policies to ensure it fulfills its commitment to addressing racism.

RACE, RACISM, AND SESAME STREET

Sesame Street’s reluctance to broach the topic of racism is notable given its history of addressing challenging, complex subjects with its young audience and their families. When the actor who played Mr. Hooper passed away, the show broached the taboo and addressed the subject of death, rather than sugar-coating his absence or hiring a replacement (*Our History*, n.d.). *Sesame Street* has addressed many other difficult topics affecting children in the U.S., including the aftermaths of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina (*Our History*, n.d.). Special initiatives outside the show use Muppets to help children and caretakers address issues including community violence, incarceration, divorce, homelessness, foster care, grief, addiction, trauma, and the challenges facing military families (*Explore topics* (n.d.)).

This reluctance to address racism likely in part reflects the reluctance noted earlier for parents and teachers to discuss racism with young children, but may also arise in part from the desire to keep the Muppets non-racialized. Jim Henson, the creator of the Muppets, once said, “The only kids who can identify along racial lines with the Muppets have to be either green or orange” (Greene 2019). However, rather than preventing the Muppets from being racially contextualized, this policy reinforces whiteness as “normality,” and categorizes most characters as white by default. Whiteness is not typically noted in the way Black or Brown characteristics may be noted, but rather than being nonexistent, it is instead omnipresent as the baseline against which “otherness” is defined (Leonardo 2007). By blocking Muppets from aligning with racial categories, *Sesame Street* defines whiteness with neutrality by excluding traits viewed as explicitly “racial,” i.e. nonwhite traits, from the Muppets. This is especially concerning given *Sesame Street* often uses the Muppets as direct proxies for the audience, with the Muppets asking relatable questions, experiencing relatable feelings, or modeling desired behaviors (e.g. calming by taking deep breaths), with the intention of children identifying with them and replicating these behaviors. Avoiding explicit diversity in the Muppets centers white audiences, who can easily and relatively completely identify with them, while marginalizing children of color, who do not see aspects of their identity treated as normal and valued.

While the *Sesame Street* Muppets may not obviously represent race, as they often have colorful fur rather than skin, they share other identity traits with humans, such as gender, culture (e.g. the Muppet Baby Bear celebrates Hanukkah), and, notably, speech and language (*Baby Bear*, n.d.). With the exception of Rosita, who is bilingual in English and Spanish, all other main-cast Muppets speak a variation of Standard American English (SAE), in that their language is free of traits “associated with particular regions or social

groups” (Norquist 2019). While this obviously does not represent children who speak languages other than English or Spanish, it also excludes children who speak African American English (AAE). AAE is equally as valid as SAE, but SAE has historically been the language of groups with the social power to enforce it as “standard” or correct (Norquist 2019). In this way, by excluding ‘racial’ traits during Muppet design, *Sesame Street* perpetuates existing racist power structures that assume SAE is superior or worthy of widespread usage and categorize AAE as “nonstandard” and discouraged. Claiming the Muppets are nonracial in fact prevents true diverse representation, where children would be able to identify with characters with diverse traits.

“Avoiding explicit diversity in the Muppets centers white audiences, who can easily and relatively completely identify with them, while marginalizing children of color, who do not see aspects of their identity treated as normal and valued.”

Historically, *Sesame Street* did have a Muppet explicitly characterized as Black. Matt Robinson, the actor who played the human main character Gordon, introduced the character in 1970: a clever purple Muppet named Roosevelt Franklin who taught a classroom of fellow elementary school students and spoke using AAE (Greene 2019). Robinson, too, was concerned about racial diversity within the Muppets despite their purported lack of race, as the puppeteers were white, leading him to create and voice the character (Tucker 2020). Roosevelt Franklin was controversial among the Black community, especially for upper-middle class Black viewers and company executives, who believed he portrayed a negative stereotype of Black children (Greene 2019). Due to the backlash, the character was phased out, especially after Robinson left *Sesame Street* as Gordon in 1972 (Tucker 2020). In the introduction to a book on *Sesame Street*’s history, drummer Questlove of The Roots reflects that Roosevelt Franklin was the first character who made him feel “seen” on TV and recalls “feeling upset when he seemed to appear less and less. Even when I was young, Roosevelt’s disappearance seemed like a mystery and an injustice” (Tucker 2020). This demonstrates how children feel the absence of characters like them on television, and that the positive representation these characters offer can stick with children for a long time, regardless of any controversy their introduction causes.

This history of race in relation to the current *Sesame Street* Muppets make the show’s summer programming about racial injustice and the fight for racial equality, following the wave of Black Lives Matter protests, especially striking. In contrast to the purported lack of race among the Muppets, videos broadcast over the summer equated differences in fur color between Muppets with differences in skin color between humans. Additionally, the show defined acts

of racism as occurring in individual interactions, rather than at an overarching or systemic level. One clip from *Sesame Street*'s town hall collaboration with CNN, where Muppets and human experts discussed questions about racism with children and their families on national television, shows Muppet Abby Cadabby stating she knows racism is wrong because of her experience witnessing Muppet Big Bird being bullied for his yellow feathers and large size (Asmelash 2020). Having defined their Muppets by default white standards, *Sesame Street* now describes these Muppets as able to experience acts of racism. This colorblindness erases the privileged racial category of 'white' and implies all racial categories have an equal chance of experiencing discrimination. *Sesame Street* does counter many of aspects of color-blindness in its town hall content, such as acknowledging that racism is a current widespread problem, especially as it affects Black Americans, and taking action is necessary to fight racism (Asmelash 2020). However, it dilutes this messaging with the Muppets. Young children will likely pay more attention to the Muppets than to longer explanations of race and racism provided by adult town hall guests.

“This colorblindness erases the privileged racial category of ‘white’ and implies all racial categories have an equal chance of experiencing discrimination.”

This trend of partially colorblind analysis continues in the summer *Sesame Street* special “The Power of We,” designed to address racism and teach children how to stand up against it (*The Power of We*, n.d.). In a song where Tamir and Gabrielle, both Black human Muppets, teach Elmo and Abby Cadabby how to be upstanders (versus bystanders) to racism, Tamir asks how they would respond if he told Elmo he didn't like him because he didn't like the color red and told Abby she is better than Elmo because she is pink (*Sesame Street* 2020). Elmo responds that he wouldn't care because he is proud to be red, while Abby says she would say it is wrong to say her color makes her better, and she would defend her friend Elmo (*Sesame Street* 2020). Tamir tells them these responses mean they are upstanding, and all four sing that they now know what to do when someone is demeaned or excluded because “in our hearts we know what's right” (*Sesame Street* 2020).

This song appears to model a scenario where Elmo is a child of color experiencing racism while Abby Cadabby is the child's white friend; however, because neither Muppet is racially specified, this context is absent for young children. Through this scenario, *Sesame Street* gives children the impression that they are all equally likely to experience an act of racism, regardless of their race. This portrays racism as merely a random act of exclusion based on physical appearance, which is consistent with three aspects of colorblindness: it “individualizes racism as irrational and pathological,” “downplays institutional relations or the racialized system,” and “downplays the legacy of slavery and genocide” (Leonardo 2007). It also assumes children hold no existing biases, and “know in their

hearts what is right” even without having racism fully explained to them.

Online article responses to both programs from communities of color critiqued *Sesame Street*'s portrayals of racism. Writer Kayla Padilla observed that the colorblind attitude of the “Power of We” song erases any understanding of specific anti-Black racism, questioned why Elmo was shown to experience racism rather than shown listening to Tamir's experiences, and noted the positioning of the Black character as the educator about how to combat racism (Padilla 2020). In response to the CNN town hall, mothers Marcella Runell Hall and Rani Varghese noted, among other things, the program's avoidance of the structural aspects of racism, that white parents should talk to their children about what it means to “be white,” and that it is essential to create a space where BIPOC children and their families can feel supported while processing complicated emotions related to experiencing racism (Varghese & Hall 2020).

Sesame Street knows the potential impact of subtle messaging on young children, and is capable of changing its longstanding practices to better serve its audience. This is illustrated by the Muppet Mr. Snuffleupagus (Snuffy), who for 14 years was friends with Big Bird but would always disappear right before the adults on *Sesame Street* walked in, imitating the imaginary friends many children have (Fessenden 2015). However, when child abuse was highlighted in a *60 Minutes* series in the early 1980s, the show changed course and constructed a two-year plan to introduce Snuffy as a permanent character and affirm Big Bird is heard and believed by adults (Fessenden 2015). Given *Sesame Street*'s influence, it is essential that it closely examines its content to ensure BIPOC children are represented, and it addresses race in a way that is color-conscious and encourages long-term engagement with anti-racism in children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To begin with, *Sesame Street* should expand representation on the show. It should abandon its nonracial policy for the Muppets, and explicitly design Muppets portraying children of color, including Muppets who use AAE. Given the low levels of diverse representation in children's media, it is especially important *Sesame Street* be a leader on this front. Rosita exemplifies that characters with specific, racially-associated traits are beloved and are positive representation for children who share these identities. Other aspects of identity that could benefit from portrayal are religious diversity, specifically the addition of a Muslim character, and the portrayal of LBGTQ+ characters. While introducing these characters may create controversy, *Sesame Street*'s own research showed that 46% of Muslim parents and 50% of parents of transgender children reported their child had received negative comments about their identity, so these areas are important to represent (Kotler et al. 2019). Finally, *Sesame Street* needs to increase the diversity of its team: currently only two puppeteers are people of color, and both the Executive Producer and the Head Writer of *Sesame Street* are white men (*About Sesame Street* 51, n.d.).

Additionally, *Sesame Street* should use Critical Race Theory and color-conscious analysis to ensure they address the complex issue of race at a deep level, even as they address a young audience. *Ses-*

Sesame Street should tell children that racism is a big topic, and they will continue to learn about it, rather than presenting bias based on appearance as the only form racism can take. This connects to the first theme of CRT: the centrality and intersectionality of racism. The show should ensure children know racism is a problem on the end of the perpetrator, and is not the victim's fault, and explain that changes can take time, in both people and systems, connecting to the systematic aspect of CRT. Even when children do not see standing up to racism effecting immediate change, for both their own actions and those of others, *Sesame Street* can emphasize they did the right thing in standing up to racism, and it is always good to do so, connecting to the social justice aspect of CRT. At the same time, *Sesame Street* should also remind children that it is okay to make a mistake, and if they do, they should apologize to the person they hurt and remember what they learned from the mistake to move forward. Finally, the show should model listening and responding to the experiences of people of color, connecting to the experiential knowledge aspect of CRT.

Lastly, *Sesame Street* should expand its content encouraging parents to talk to and educate their children about race. One helpful step could be creating a *Sesame Street* in Communities topic designed to help children and families of color process trauma caused by racism. In this, they should consider that families may have a complex relationship with racial identity, such as children who are mixed race or adopted. *Sesame Street* should also encourage parents to tell their children that they, too, are growing in their experience with racism. For example, parents can tell their children that they find racism hard to understand or talk about sometimes, but they have learned more as they practiced. Finally, they should encourage children to keep asking questions, including difficult ones. Parents can admit the question is hard to answer and that they will think about it, or direct the child to another trusted source of information.

These examples of ways *Sesame Street* can improve its policies on race show both the necessity of addressing race and racism with young children and critically examining how this education occurs, and the potential *Sesame Street* has to make a positive impact in this area. If *Sesame Street* takes its resources and its desire to engage its audience on complex topics and applies them to its discussion and representation of race, it could help start an extremely valuable conversation for millions of children and their families across the country.

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