

"Thieves Make Opportunities Disappear"

By B. B. Robinson, Ph.D.

When a law-abiding black man automatically arouses the suspicion of a shopping mall security guard, is it racism?

It may not be outright racial animosity, but it certainly betrays a bias - that security guards seem to think all blacks are potential thieves. Why?

One reason may be the new television show "Thief," which recently debuted on the FX network. In it, Emmy-winner Andre Braugher - who is black - plays a master thief.

While watching the first episode of "Thief," I recalled an old Southern adage: "If you lie, you will steal, and if you steal you will kill." Braugher's character exemplifies that wisdom when he lies about his occupation, commits his crime of high-tech cat burglary and contributes to the murder of one of his henchmen. This might make for compelling drama, but it also perpetuates bias.

"Thief" isn't the only new show causing this problem. Black thieves are also prominently featured in NBC's new show "Heist" and the British import "Hustle" on AMC. While it is great to see more working black actors, the preponderance of criminal roles is not an equitable trade-off.

In his article "Trojan Horses of Race" in the March 2005 Harvard Law Review, UCLA School of Law professor Jerry Kang argues that broadcasters play a powerful role in shaping our thinking and actions on race. Focusing on newscasts, Professor Kang notes: "Racial minorities are repeatedly featured as violent criminals. Consumption of these images... exacerbates our implicit biases against minorities."

Viewing Braugher's sympathetic black criminal on "Thief" - an entertainment program - undoubtedly has an effect on viewers' attitudes.

Imagine the subliminal messages Asians, Hispanics, Native Americans and whites receive about black males while watching "Heist," "Hustle" and "Thief." They send a clear message that such people will lie, steal and kill.

Consider the effect such that such a perception has on someone who is approached by a black man seeking employment.

Given that black males already suffer from the highest rate of unemployment in the nation, we certainly do not need these shows contributing to the disappearance of employment opportunities. Even though "Thief" seems to take pains to dispel some myths by making Braugher's character educated and financially stable, it still boils down to removing one myth from the table at the expense of advancing another.

I comprehend that black actors should have every opportunity to work. However, when they portray master thieves to an international audience, the few paychecks generated by their acting pales in comparison to the lost income for those whose work opportunities disappear as a direct or indirect result of the programs. There is also the lost dignity of being profiled in a shopping mall.

Let's face reality. Consciously or unconsciously, prospective employers who view these television programs are likely to view certain black male candidates as undesirable because they may perceive them as not trustworthy.

In his article, Professor Kang cited other studies to prove that the association of blacks with crime increases bias against the African-American community. When pressed to explain if this meant broadcasters needed to be regulated, he replied: "We cap indecency in many ways. We penalize bad speech, including profanity. We affirmatively require broadcasters to show good speech in the form of children's television. So the question is not whether we regulate. The question is how much and for what reason do we regulate."

Professor Kang's presumption presents a choice: can television fix itself or will the government step up? If change comes through regulation, shouldn't there also be a concern that good-natured rules will someday become onerous?

Fortunately, there are methods for stopping thieves - especially those that have devastating effects on your life - that don't necessitate federal intervention. For those on the television, first erect barriers to entry (don't watch the programs). Second, contact the authorities (send written complaints to the networks and their sponsors).

But the best method of all for stopping theft, however, is for the thieves to stop themselves.

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