ENTERTAINING GENIUS:
U.S. MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF EXCEPTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

JULIE B. WIEST

Introduction

We learn how to assign meanings to things, experiences, behaviours, and even ourselves through the socialization process, and mass media as an agency of socialization are particularly influential. Despite decades of studies in media representation, with scholars examining portrayals of a wide array of social groups and phenomena and those portrayals’ effects on public perceptions, studies of what constitutes exceptional intelligence have been extremely light. Most people can identify real and fictional people that are considered highly intelligent, but less clear are the reasons and processes by which meanings about exceptional intelligence are established and shared. This study helps to fill that gap by: (1) uncovering patterned characteristics of highly intelligent characters as represented in U.S. entertainment media, and (2) identifying links between those patterns of representation and larger social structures.

Exceptional intelligence is discussed in the literature in a variety of ways. Education scholars offer the most-thorough examinations, particularly in relation to student achievement on standardized assessments (e.g., Jacob, 2001) and educational promotion within schools (e.g., Anagnostopoulos, 2006; O’Connor, 1999, 2001). Some scholars have focused on the influence of group membership and social location on intellectual development (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Farber, 1965; Hunt & Carlson, 2007). Other studies link aspects of social location to perceptions of intelligence. For example, some scholars point to the long-held cultural stereotypes of deficient intelligence among African-Americans (Banks & Jewell, 1995) and hyper-intelligence of Asian-Americans (Nagoshi, 1998). And scholars interested in the links between gender roles and intelligence demonstrate that the “nerd girl” can be understood as “an alternative to the pressures of hegemonic femininity” (Bucholtz, 1999, p. 213) and the male nerd as both challenging and complementing hegemonic masculinity (Kendall, 2000). A few scholars have studied nerds as a distinct
social identity among youths (Bucholtz, 1999; Kinney, 1993; Tolone &

Because it is difficult to measure, intelligence is sometimes studied vis-
à-vis other presumably related characteristics. For example, Mayer, Caruso, 
Zigler, and Dreyden (1989) constructed the Intellectual Experience Scale to 
measure intelligence using a number of “intelligence-related” characteristics, 
including degree of intellectual absorption, intellectual confidence, intellectual 
curiosity, intellectual values and pleasure, and intuitive and insightful thought.

Sternberg and Grigorenko (2004) argue that intelligence cannot be 
understood without examining the cultural context in which it is defined. In an 
erlier study, Sternberg, Conway, Ketron, and Bernstein (1981) found a 
tendency among Americans to define exceptional intelligence as having 
practical problem-solving abilities, strong verbal abilities, and social 
competence. In contrast, scholars studying non-Western definitions of 
intelligence have uncovered different meanings. African and Indian conceptions 
of high intelligence tend to focus on skills that foster group relations and focus 
on achieving a common goal (Ruzgis & Grigorenko, 1994; Srivastava & Misra, 
2001). And Chen (1994) found that Chinese conceptions of high intelligence 
emphasize verbal and nonverbal reasoning abilities and rote memory.

Studies of media representation compose an extensive body of 
literature. Within U.S. entertainment media alone, scholars have examined 
representations of Native Americans in films, television, and literature 
(Fitzgerald, 2010; Meek, 2006); salespeople in films and television (Hartman, 
2006); people with Attention Deficit Disorder on television (EnglandKennedy, 
2008); stepfamilies in films (Leon & Angst, 2005); virginity loss in films 
(Carpenter, 2009); gender-role behaviour on primetime television (Hess & 
Grant, 1983); African-American stereotypes in films (Hughey, 2009); and the 
Middle East in films and television after 9/11 (Hirchi, 2007). Some scholars 
have examined portrayals of various groups on specific television shows or 
films: Merskin (2007) examined portrayals of Latina women on the show 
Desperate Housewives; Van Damme and Van Bauwel (2010) looked at gender 
stereotypes on the teen show One Tree Hill; Avila-Saaavedra (2010) explored 
U.S.-Latinx identity on the show Ugly Betty; Hatfield (2010) examined 
hegemonic masculinity on the show Two and a Half Men; Hirji (2011) looked 
at representations of Muslim women on the shows 24, Lost, and Little Mosque 
on the Prairie; Weaver (2004) examined rape discourses in the film The 
Accused; and Downing (2007) looked at terrorism portrayals on the show 24.

Several studies were found that examine media representations of 
groups relevant to the current study, though none focuses on representations in
film. Wilson and Latterell (2001) compared children’s perceptions of mathematicians to popular media portrayals of the group, finding that both tend to cast mathematicians as nerdy men, brilliant but often frustrated, physically unattractive, obsessed with their work, with few friends and poor social skills. They argue that this characterization is not only unrealistic but that it suggests a media effect that could be discouraging young people from enjoying math and/or pursuing it as a career. Similarly, Franzini (2008) argues that teen television shows represent characters as either “cool” or “smart,” but rarely both, suggesting that scholarly intelligence and social intelligence are fundamentally opposed. Examining representations of exceptional intelligence in prime-time fictional television shows, Kahlenberg (2008) found that most highly intelligent characters were male, young or middle aged, members of the middle or upper class, overrepresented in professional and law enforcement occupations, with little to no sense of humour. Kahlenberg (2008) also identified three different kinds of intelligence represented on prime-time television shows: academic, practical, and technical intelligence.

Several scholars have examined representations of the “nerd” on television. Bednarek (2012) explored the “nerd” stereotype in her examination of the main character (Sheldon Cooper) on the show The Big Bang Theory. She argues that Western media frequently present nerds and geeks as young, white males with particular characteristics: (1) intelligent and studious; (2) an interest in, obsession with, or knowledge of all things technological or scientific, especially relating to computers; (3) an interest in science fiction and fantasy; (4) obsessive-compulsive or Asperger-like behaviour; (5) socially inept or awkward; (6) unattractive, in terms of weight or wearing glasses and/or unfashionable clothing; (7) physically awkward or unfit; and (8) sexually inactive or a virgin (Bednarek, 2012, pp. 203–204). Randell-Moon (2008, p. 181) identifies media representations of “nerds” as linked to academic intelligence (rather than other forms of intelligence such as practical knowledge) and describes the status as “socially marginalizing.”

Nearly all scholars who examine media representations of various groups and phenomena argue that these portrayals reinforce cultural stereotypes and/or are at least somewhat distorted versions of reality. No study was found that suggests these media portrayals are unreasonably positive, but some suggest that the representations are qualitatively negative (e.g., Hartman, 2006; Hirchi, 2007; Meek, 2006; Randell-Moon, 2008; Thomas & Holdeman, 2008). For example, Thomas and Holdeman (2008, p. 31) argue that popular media portray intellectuals as “life’s losers” and exceptional intelligence as contrary to beauty, sexiness, stylishness, gracefulness, and happiness. Only one study was found (McVittie & McKinlay, 2013) that examined the ways in which members
of a group portrayed in media (in this case, psychiatrists) responded to their misrepresentation, suggesting that the representations are often one-sided.

Clearly, much research has examined meanings related to intelligence, as well as media representations of myriad groups and characteristics, but few scholars have linked the two. Little is known about how exceptional intelligence is portrayed in U.S. mass media, particularly when the subjects of those portrayals would not be characterized as “nerds.” Mass media (especially entertainment media) are a significant agency of socialization, imparting cultural messages that shape public consciousness. It is important to pay close attention to the meanings transmitted within those messages, especially as they link to public perceptions and behaviours. This study helps fill a gap in this literature, specifically by addressing the following research questions: How are exceptionally intelligent characters represented in U.S. entertainment television shows and films? And what meanings about intelligence are constructed and/or reinforced via these media representations of exceptionally intelligent television and film characters?

**Theoretical Framework**

The perspectives of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism, as well as media effects studies, help clarify the role of media in creating and perpetuating social reality and, thus, formed the guiding theoretical framework for this study. The symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes the social processes through which humans learn to interpret their world. From this perspective, humans do not merely respond to stimuli in their environment, but they respond to an object, person, or event based on the meaning they have assigned to it/them (Blumer, 1969). According to Blumer (1969), meanings are not inherent in things, people, or situations but are conferred through social processes of interpretation, communication, and interaction. In other words, we must learn from others what things mean, how to interpret meaning in varying conditions, and how to respond in socially acceptable ways. This meaning-making process shapes human behaviour.

We learn how to assign meaning to things we encounter through the socialization process and various agents of socialization (e.g., family members, teachers, peers, religious leaders, etc.). Mass media are a particularly influential agency of socialization because of their enormous reach. In 2012, the average U.S. adult spent 13.6 hours per day consuming mass media, including watching television, listening to radio, making or receiving voice calls, using desktop computers, using mobile computers (including laptops, smartphones, and
media, tablets), and gaming (Short, 2013). The largest percentage of this time—40 percent—was spent watching television (Short, 2013).

Scholars have studied media consumption for decades, and there is general agreement that mass media (particularly television) play a prominent role in the construction of social reality (e.g., Fox & Philliber, 1978; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Gerbner, 1998; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986; Hall, 1975; Massoni, 2004; O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997; Samaniego & Pascual, 2007; Smythe, 1954). Kellner (1995) argues that mass media have a profound influence on people’s perceptions of their world, social groups, and even themselves. The decades-long Cultural Indicators Project, from which cultivation analysis developed, found that heavy television viewership has a substantial influence on viewers’ perceptions of the world (Gerbner, 1998; Gerbner et al., 1986; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980; Hawkins, Pingree, & Adler, 1987). And film scholars have drawn similar conclusions (e.g., Carpenter, 2009).

Many of the misconceptions held by heavy media consumers illustrate cultural stereotypes that perpetuate social inequalities (Sanders & Ramasubramanian, 2012). In particular, scholars who have examined representations related to race (Avila-Saavedra, 2010; Ford, 1997; Hughey, 2009; Merskin, 2007; Saunders, 2008; Sinkiewicz & Marx, 2009) and gender roles (Andrae, 1996; Caputi & Sagle, 2004; Hart, 2008; Hatfield, 2010; Hess & Grant, 1983; Kahlenberg, 2008; Romm, 1986; Van Damme & Van Bouwel, 2010) argue that the portrayals help perpetuate constructs of social power that advantage whites and men. The Cultural Indicators Project found that the overrepresentation of powerful groups (whites, men, the middle-aged, and those with higher occupational prestige) on television does influence viewers’ perceptions of these real-life groups (Gerbner, 1998). And these influences do not just affect individuals’ perceptions of out-group members, but evidence suggests that they also influence perceptions of one’s in-group (Jeffres, Atkin, Lee, & Neuendorf, 2011; Sanders & Ramasubramanian, 2012).

In sum, mass media constitute a prominent agency of socialization, media representations are often distorted versions of reality, and these representations influence public perceptions about the world, social groups, and even one’s own identity. This provides the guiding framework and rationale for this study of highly intelligent characters in television and film, suggesting that media portrayals may create and maintain meanings about exceptional intelligence, who is considered highly intelligent (and who isn’t), and how individuals may (or may not) identify themselves that way.
Data and Method

This study employs a qualitative content analysis to explore meanings about exceptional intelligence, especially as those meanings are transmitted in entertainment media via representations of highly intelligent fictional characters. In contrast to real people who appear on news shows, talk shows, reality shows, and documentaries, fictional characters are media creations that are rather tightly controlled. They typically appear in only one television show or film, and audiences thus receive a relatively consistent representation.

Further, communication scholars who study “entertainment-education” strategies (e.g., Singhal, Rogers, & Brown, 1993; Singhal, Wang, & Rogers, 2013) have found that embedding persuasive messages in entertainment media content can be highly effective in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours. This suggests that media messages meant to entertain can be at least as influential in shaping cultural meaning as media messages that more overtly intend to educate and/or persuade; thus, entertainment media are important sites for social research.

Because no academic studies were found that examined broad media portrayals of exceptionally intelligent characters (i.e., in multiple television shows and/or multiple films), there was no precedent for compiling a sampling frame from which to draw characters for analysis. Therefore, I started with an Internet search, using terms such as “smart TV characters,” “smart movie characters,” “smart fictional characters,” and “genius characters.” This led to quite a few lists composed by both professional and amateur writers/critics with titles including: “The Top 25 Smartest TV Characters,” “The 10 Smartest Characters on Television,” “Top 10 Amazingly Intelligent Characters in Movies,” and “Top 10 Fictional Geniuses.” I searched for and examined these lists until I had reached the point of saturation and was no longer seeing new names. I then composed a list of 40 characters that appeared most often across these lists.

Using that final list as my sampling frame, I employed the purposive sampling method to obtain a manageable sample of 20 characters, including 10 from television shows and 10 from films (see table below). In doing so, I looked for variety in age, occupation, and socioeconomic status of the characters, as well as variety in show/film genre, production years, and show format (e.g., half-hour sitcom, hour-long drama, etc.). In addition, because the literature indicates a strong influence of gender and race in media constructions of intelligence (i.e., most highly intelligent characters are portrayed as white males), I attempted to increase the gender and racial diversity of the sample by including an equal number of male and female characters and every nonwhite
character in the sampling frame. Despite these efforts, however, only one character in the sample—Olivia Pope—is not white.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTER</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>YEAR(S)</th>
<th>GENRE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Television show characters</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperance Brennan</td>
<td><em>Bones</em> (Fox)</td>
<td>2005–</td>
<td>Crime drama (hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheldon Cooper</td>
<td><em>The Big Bang Theory</em> (CBS)</td>
<td>2007–</td>
<td>Comedy (½ hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy Farrah Fowler</td>
<td><em>The Big Bang Theory</em> (CBS)</td>
<td>2007–</td>
<td>Comedy (½ hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gregory House</td>
<td><em>House M.D.</em> (Fox)</td>
<td>2004–2012</td>
<td>Medical drama (hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie Knope</td>
<td><em>Parks &amp; Recreation</em> (NBC)</td>
<td>2009–2015</td>
<td>Comedy (½ hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian Monk</td>
<td><em>Monk</em> (USA)</td>
<td>2002–2009</td>
<td>Crime drama/comedy (hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia Pope</td>
<td><em>Scandal</em> (ABC)</td>
<td>2012–</td>
<td>Political drama (hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spencer Reid</td>
<td><em>Criminal Minds</em> (CBS)</td>
<td>2005–</td>
<td>Crime drama (hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Simpson</td>
<td><em>The Simpsons</em> (Fox)</td>
<td>1989–</td>
<td>Animated comedy (½ hour)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walter White</td>
<td><em>Breaking Bad</em> (AMC)</td>
<td>2008–2013</td>
<td>Crime drama (hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Film characters</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ray Babbitt</td>
<td><em>Rain Man</em></td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Drama</td>
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<tr>
<td>Erin Brockovich</td>
<td><em>Erin Brockovich</em></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katniss Everdeen</td>
<td><em>The Hunger Games</em></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Adventure/thriller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermione Granger</td>
<td><em>Harry Potter</em></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will Hunting</td>
<td><em>Good Will Hunting</em></td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannibal Lecter</td>
<td><em>The Silence of the Lambs</em></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Crime drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Nash</td>
<td><em>A Beautiful Mind</em></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisbeth Salander</td>
<td><em>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</em></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Drama/thriller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Stark</td>
<td><em>Iron Man</em></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Action/fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarice Starling</td>
<td><em>The Silence of the Lambs</em></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Crime drama</td>
</tr>
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</table>
To study representations of the 20 characters, I selected the qualitative content analysis method, which is frequently employed for in-depth examinations of media content. The approach consists of a search for underlying patterns or meanings in the content under study (Bryman, 2001), guided by broad research questions and loose categories or themes. I developed analysis categories based on the study’s research questions and guided by the literature and theoretical framework. They included demographic categories (character’s occupation, gender, age, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, dis/ability status, and religious affiliation); indications of each character’s intelligence (i.e., what makes him/her super-smart?); descriptions of the character and his/her daily life (i.e., main interests or hobbies, relationships with others, emotional displays, leadership roles, and orientation toward rules, laws, and policies); evidence of intelligence-related characteristics; evidence of characteristics associated with the nerd stereotype; as well as an “other” category for any additional observations.

In addition to my own analysis of the 20 characters using the categories just described, I also enlisted help from 10 undergraduate research assistants. Each assistant first received training on the method and analysis categories, and then was assigned two characters to analyze. They were instructed to watch each film or selected television show episodes at least twice while recording observations. No previous studies were found that suggested an appropriate number of television show episodes to analyze for a qualitative content analysis, so I selected the number of episodes by matching the viewing time (minus advertising) to an average feature-length film. Thus, those analyzing television shows selected a minimum of three episodes for one-hour shows and six episodes for half-hour shows. Particular episodes were selected by analysts according to convenience and accessibility (e.g., some borrowed a season on DVD from the university library; others watched whatever episodes were available via Netflix or Hulu). This increased the overall number of episodes included in the analysis, since at least three people observed each character and picked their own episodes. When data collection was complete, all written observations were reviewed and checked for reliability. The findings below describe only the observations on which all three observers (myself and the two assistants assigned to that character) agreed.
Findings

Character Demographics

Age. Characters represent a range of ages, though most are under 40 years and none is older than 60 years. Three characters are children: Lisa Simpson (8 year-old), Hermione Granger (11), and Katniss Everdeen (16). Eleven characters are between ages 20 and 39: Will Hunting (20–21), Lisbeth Salander (23), Spencer Reid (20s), Clarice Starling (late 20s or early 30s), Erin Brockovich (30s), Sheldon Cooper (30s), Amy Farrah Fowler (30s), Olivia Pope (late 30s), Temperance Brennan (late 30s), Leslie Knope (late 30s), and Tony Stark (late 30s). Five characters are between ages 40 and 59: Raymond Babbit (40s), Walter White (50), Gregory House (50s), Hannibal Lecter (50s), and Adrian Monk (50s). The character John Nash was excluded from the analysis of age, as the film in which he appears chronicles his life from young adulthood to old age.

Socioeconomic status. Most characters appear to have middle to high socioeconomic status, as estimated by occupational prestige, educational attainment, and approximate income and wealth. Just five characters would be considered lower status: Erin Brockovich, Katniss Everdeen, Will Hunting, Lisbeth Salander, and Lisa Simpson.

Gender performance. Including an equal number of male and female characters in the final sample proved valuable, as there are some clear differences in the ways highly intelligent male characters and highly intelligent female characters are represented. Female characters’ femininity tended to be downplayed in various ways or even almost absent. Four of the female characters—Erin Brockovich, Leslie Knope, Olivia Pope, and Lisa Simpson—demonstrate idealized femininity in several ways (e.g., wearing feminine clothing, showing a range of emotions, and valuing and investing in their personal relationships), but they also violate idealized femininity in others ways. For example, Knope and Pope have high-status careers; Brockovich is loud, foul-mouthed, and does not relate well to other women; and all are strong-willed, independent, and outspoken. The other six female characters—Temperance Brennan, Katniss Everdeen, Amy Farrah Fowler, Hermione Granger, Lisbeth Salander, and Clarice Starling—demonstrate very few aspects of idealized femininity. For example, Brennan works with dead bodies and does not mind getting dirty; Everdeen is a skilled hunter and recoils at compliments on her appearance; Starling is exceptionally brave and strong; all are independent and strong-willed; all show very little emotion; and none wears traditionally feminine clothing or much (if any) makeup or jewellery. In contrast, most of the male characters fit many aspects of hegemonic
masculinity, with three—Will Hunting, Tony Stark, and Walter White—demonstrating almost hyper-masculinity with their good looks, charm, strength, and/or strong sexual drive. Just two male characters—Sheldon Cooper and Adrian Monk—demonstrate very few aspects of hegemonic masculinity. For example, Cooper is physically weak and has no sexual experience or interest, and Monk is uncomfortable around women, does not know how to shoot guns, and does not demonstrate a desire for dominance or control.

**Sexual orientation.** Nineteen of the 20 characters are heterosexual, though not all participate in sexual activity or demonstrate sexual interest. Seven characters appear almost asexual, though there are hints (e.g., references to ex-partners or mild flirtations with the opposite sex) about their heterosexuality: Raymond Babbit, Sheldon Cooper, Hermione Granger, Hannibal Lecter, Adrian Monk, Spencer Reid, and Clarice Starling. Just one character is not heterosexual: Lisbeth Salander appears to identify as bisexual or queer, as she is shown sleeping with a woman and a man during the film.

**Occupation.** Of the 17 characters who are over age 18, most fit into a narrow range of occupations. The largest occupational group includes eight scientists or doctors: Temperance Brennan (forensic anthropologist), Sheldon Cooper (physicist), Amy Farrah Fowler (neurobiologist), Gregory House (medical doctor), Hannibal Lecter (former psychiatrist), John Nash (mathematician and professor), Tony Stark (scientist and inventor), and Walter White (former chemist and high school chemistry teacher). The second-largest occupational group includes six characters in government and/or criminal justice roles: Leslie Knope (deputy city parks director and member of city council), Adrian Monk (private detective), Olivia Pope (political strategist), Spencer Reid (FBI agent and criminal profiler), Lisbeth Salander (investigator and computer hacker), and Clarice Starling (FBI agent-in-training). Two characters work in what would be considered blue-collar jobs (Erin Brockovich is an officer worker, and Will Hunting is a janitor and construction worker), and one is unemployed (Raymond Babbit).

**Dis/ability status.** A disproportionately large number of characters appear to have mental or developmental disabilities. Three demonstrate symptoms of autism (Raymond Babbit, Sheldon Cooper, and Spencer Reid). Two demonstrate symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder (Cooper and Adrian Monk). In addition, John Nash has schizophrenia, Hannibal Lecter is a cannibal, Gregory House has a drug addiction, and Lisbeth Salandar discusses her possible insanity. Just one character has a physical disability: Because of an injury, Tony Stark requires an electrical energy source to keep pieces of shrapnel out of his heart.
Religious affiliation. No character is overtly religious. One character (Lisa Simpson) is Buddhist after converting from Christianity, and one (Temperance Brennan) is a proclaimed atheist. For the other 18 characters, religion appears to play no role in their lives. No affiliation is suggested for any of them aside from two characters (Leslie Knope and Hermione Granger) celebrating Christmas, but this should not necessarily be considered an expression of Christian faith. According to the Pew Research Center (2013a), about 90 percent of Americans celebrate Christmas, but only about half consider it mostly a religious holiday.

Explanations of Intelligence

A variety of characteristics are used to indicate the characters’ intelligence, though three fit a majority of characters: being exceptionally logical, analytical, and/or intuitive (fits 13 characters), having a high IQ (fits 11 characters), and having an ability to think on one’s feet, perform under pressure, and/or being exceptionally clever (fits 11 characters). Other indicators of intelligence for these characters include: having advanced knowledge in his/her field (fits nine characters), having a good vocabulary or being well-spoken (fits eight characters), having advanced knowledge of art, literature, and/or classical music (fits eight characters), being innovative or a problem-solver (fits six characters), manipulating or fooling others (fits five characters), and having an exceptional memory (fits four characters).

Interests and Hobbies

Half of the characters had few or no apparent interests or hobbies outside of their occupation: Temperance Brennan, Erin Brockovich, Sheldon Cooper, Gregory House, Adrian Monk, John Nash, Olivia Pope, Spencer Reid, Lisbeth Salander, and Clarice Starling. Six characters enjoyed studying subjects unrelated to their occupation during free time. Activities that five or six characters enjoyed included reading and spending time with family and friends. Activities that two or three characters enjoyed included watching television and/or films, listening to or playing music, video chatting, art or museums, volunteering or civic engagement, and physical activity.

Relationships with Others

Most of the characters (13 out of 20) have few or no close friends, though this appeared to be for different reasons. Of these, just one character is an almost total loner (Lisbeth Salander) and one is generally disliked by others (Gregory House), but 11 appear to be mostly liked by others and capable of fitting in...
during most social situations (Raymond Babbit, Erin Brockovich, Katniss Everdeen, Hannibal Lecter, Adrian Monk, John Nash, Spencer Reid, Lisa Simpson, Tony Stark, Clarice Starling, and Walter White). Five characters have a handful of close friends (Temperance Brennan, Sheldon Cooper, Amy Farrah Fowler, Hermione Granger, and Will Hunting), and just two—both female characters—appear to be socially well-adjusted with many friends (Leslie Knope and Olivia Pope). Interestingly, only four characters appear to have close relationships with family members (Raymond Babbit, Katniss Everdeen, Lisa Simpson, and Walter White). Almost all have difficulty managing or maintaining romantic relationships.

**Emotional Displays**

Most of the characters (14 out of 20) demonstrate abnormal emotional displays. Eight of these display extremely subdued or no emotion (with the most common emotional displays being excitement over their work or frustration with others): Temperance Brennan, Sheldon Cooper, Amy Farrah Fowler, Gregory House, Adrian Monk, Spencer Reid, Clarice Starling, and Walter White. Five characters demonstrate limited but strong emotions (mostly anger, fear, and sadness): Raymond Babbit, Will Hunting, Hannibal Lecter, Lisbeth Salander, and Tony Stark. Four characters display inappropriate emotional responses for given situations (all also appear to have mental or developmental disorders): Raymond Babbit, Sheldon Cooper, Adrian Monk, and John Nash. The six characters who display normative emotions are all female: Erin Brockovich, Katniss Everdeen, Hermione Granger, Leslie Knope, Olivia Pope, and Lisa Simpson.

**Leadership Roles**

The characters are almost evenly split in terms of whether or not they are represented as leaders. Eleven characters occupy leadership roles: Temperance Brennan, Erin Brockovich, Katniss Everdeen, Hermione Granger, Will Hunting, Leslie Knope, Olivia Pope, Lisa Simpson, Tony Stark, Clarice Starling, and Walter White. A greater proportion of female characters are represented as leaders (8 out of 10), compared to male characters (3 out of 10).

**Orientation towards Rules, Laws, and Policies**

Again, characters are almost evenly split in terms of their orientation as either “rule followers” or “rule breakers,” with slightly more of the latter. Twelve characters frequently break various kinds of rules (e.g., laws, policies, and
social norms): Raymond Babbit, Erin Brockovich, Katniss Everdeen, Gregory House, Will Hunting, Hannibal Lecter, Adrian Monk, John Nash, Olivia Pope, Lisbeth Salander, Tony Stark, and Walter White. In this case, a greater proportion of male characters are represented as rule breakers (8 out of 10), compared to female characters (4 out of 10). Examining this category with the preceding one reveals interesting findings. Among those considered leaders, there are slightly more rule breakers (six) than rule followers (five), and all of the rule-following leaders are female characters.

**Intelligence-Related and “Nerd” Characteristics**

Most of the five intelligence-related characteristics identified in the literature are demonstrated by the characters in this study. Fourteen characters demonstrate intellectual absorption; all 20 demonstrate intellectual confidence, 18 demonstrate intellectual curiosity, 11 demonstrate intellectual values and pleasure, and 18 demonstrate intuitive and insightful thought.

In contrast, the “nerd” characteristics identified in the literature did not fit many of the characters studied. Six characters demonstrate an interest in, obsession with, or knowledge of all things technological or scientific; three demonstrate an interest in sci-fi, fantasy, and/or related activities; seven demonstrate social ineptness or awkwardness; four are unattractive in terms of weight and/or unfashionable clothing; and five are physically awkward or unfit. Two characters (Sheldon Cooper and Spencer Reid) demonstrate all five characteristics, and two others (Will Hunting and Walter White) demonstrate near-perfect opposition to these characteristics.

**Discussion**

Like other studies of media representation, this study uncovered narrow and mostly stereotypical representations of highly intelligent characters in U.S. entertainment media. This study contributes to knowledge about underlying meanings regarding exceptional intelligence in U.S. culture, as indicated by mass media representations. Specifically, the findings indicate what exceptional intelligence means in U.S. culture, as well as who is exceptionally intelligent (and who is not).

As indicated by Sternberg and colleagues (1981), exceptional intelligence itself is narrowly defined, as it is linked to some attributes and not others. In particular, this study indicates that the definition of exceptional intelligence in U.S. culture includes: a high IQ; extraordinary capacities for
logical, analytical, and/or intuitive thought; and a remarkable ability to control situations and perform under pressure. Secondary to those characteristics are advanced knowledge in one’s field; a good vocabulary or eloquence; advanced knowledge of art, literature, and/or classical music; problem-solving capabilities; the capacity to manipulate others; and an exceptional memory. Consistent with Kahlenberg’s (2008) findings, exceptional intelligence appears to also mean the acquisition of purposeful, practical knowledge, as evidenced by the absence of one intelligence-related characteristic among characters in the sample: intellectual values and pleasure (i.e., the enjoyment of learning and pursuing knowledge for its own sake). Also absent from the cultural definition of exceptional intelligence are characteristics like kindness, generosity, selflessness, courage, and well-roundedness.

Demographic characteristics of highly intelligent characters in this study appear to fit those identified by previous studies (e.g., Kahlenberg, 2008). A profile of a typical highly intelligent character represented in U.S. entertainment media appears to be: a white male (or unfeminine female) who is between 30 and 60 years old, heterosexual though with limited sexual interest, a member of the middle or upper class who works as a doctor or scientist, unable or unwilling to maintain close social relationships or show emotions, uninterested in hobbies, not religious, and exceptionally intuitive, clever, confident, and focused. Summarizing common characteristics of highly intelligent people as indicated by media portrayals not only illustrates cultural ideas about who is highly intelligent, but it also reveals connections between these ideals and social power constructs in the U.S., particularly with regard to age, class, occupational status, sexual orientation, and gender.

Most of the characters in the sample are under 40 years old and none is older than 60 years, suggesting that exceptional intelligence is related to youth. This notion is linked to ageist ideology in U.S. culture, especially the idea that mental capabilities decline in later adulthood. Further, several of the characters are identified as child prodigies (John Nash, Will Hunting, Tony Stark, Spencer Reid, and Lisa Simpson), emphasizing the connection between intelligence and youth.

Most of the characters appear to have middle to high socioeconomic status and work in high-status occupations. This suggests that exceptional intelligence is related to occupational prestige, educational attainment, income, and wealth, all of which are highly valued in U.S. culture. In addition, all but one of the characters are heterosexual, albeit many with subdued sexual interest, suggesting that intelligence is related to a privileged sexual orientation, as well as the value of self-denial.
Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Hart, 2008; Kahlenberg, 2008), there are important differences in the representations of male and female characters. First, exceptional intelligence seems to be a component of masculinity but not femininity. The very meaning of exceptional intelligence in U.S. culture is more closely related to aspects of hegemonic masculinity (which emphasizes logical thought, control, and confidence) than idealized femininity (which emphasizes sentimental thought, passivity, and modesty). Most of the highly intelligent male characters were still represented as masculine and fit many of the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, but every highly intelligent female character deviated from idealized femininity in some way, many characters substantially so. In addition, the male characters were given more autonomy with regard to how they apply their intelligence, as they were not as often portrayed as leaders or rule followers. For the female characters, in contrast, there was a greater expectation for them to share their intellectual gifts for the good of others, as they frequently are portrayed as both leaders and rule followers. This difference highlights traditional gender roles, particularly the expectation of female altruism and the tolerance of male self-centeredness.

Although race could not be adequately analyzed in this study because of lack of representation, it is worth noting that the only nonwhite character in the study, a Black female (Olivia Pope), is one of few nonwhite characters on the show (Scandal) and is in a subordinated role as the employee and mistress of a powerful white man (the president of the United States). Both of these observations appear to fit within current U.S. power structures that privilege whiteness (and maleness).

Finally, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Franzini, 2008; Thomas & Holderman, 2008), the findings suggest a stigma of sorts for highly intelligent people in U.S. culture. Although the characters in this study are largely not portrayed as “nerds,” they are represented as different from “the rest of us” in ways that likely would be defined as undesirable. One example of this is how exceptional intelligence appears to be linked to a lack of religious affiliation, as about 80 percent of the U.S. population is religiously affiliated (Pew Research Center, 2013b). Exceptional intelligence also appears to be linked to mental disabilities, poor relationships with others, and limited emotional capacity (especially for men), all considered undesirable or deviant in U.S. culture. Lastly, exceptional intelligence appears to be linked to an obsession and total absorption in one’s work, with few outside interests or hobbies, which contrasts with the cultural value of moderation and a belief in the importance of a “work-life balance.”
There are several possible implications to the narrow ways in which exceptional intelligence and highly intelligent people are represented in U.S. entertainment media and defined in U.S. culture. As indicated in the literature, media portrayals help create and maintain meanings about various groups and social characteristics. Extremely narrow representations of highly intelligent people in U.S. entertainment media could contribute to public perceptions about intelligence that support current power structures and further subjugate subordinate groups. These representations also may serve to stigmatize exceptional intelligence in ways that discourage intellectual pursuits. Further, forms of intelligence and related characteristics that do not fit culturally defined intelligence may not be recognized, limiting opportunities for many.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations to this study should be considered in assessing its findings and when designing similar studies in the future. First, the sampling method inadvertently composed a sample of almost entirely white characters, which substantially reduced the study’s ability to identify influences from cultural meanings related to race. However, this does reveal an important lack of racial diversity in published lists of highly intelligent characters that should be examined in future research. This could be related to the well-documented underrepresentation of people of colour in entertainment media (particularly in positive roles) or possibly the characteristics or interests of the list-writers. Future research should consider employing a method that draws a more inclusive sample to enhance understanding and comparison of diverse portrayals of exceptional intelligence.

In addition, a qualitative content analysis is a limited data-collection method in that it can only be used to describe content under study and cannot be used to infer effects of that content. Other scholars have identified media-based influences on public perceptions of social groups and characteristics, but more research is needed to identify any social, cultural, political, economic, or psychological effects of these narrow media representations of exceptional intelligence.

Finally, this study only examined representations in U.S. television shows and films; future studies could promote deeper understanding of the links between media representations of exceptional intelligence and cultural meaning by examining media content outside the U.S.
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