

A RAZOR-SHARP ANALYSIS
OF THE MOVIE

BARBERSHOP

By Jason Hayes, Manjah Fernandez, Aaron Bowser, & La Vonne I. Neal

We are three African American male pre-service teachers, and this is our razor-sharp critique of African American academic underachievement depicted in the movie *Barbershop*.

We will focus on two barbers, Ricky Nash (a parolee) and Jimmy James (a college student), whom we suggest reinforce negative perceptions of academic achievement. We are concerned about these stereotypes of academic underachievement because, according to historian Carlos Cortes (2000), media images can influence students and teachers.

Depictions, in short, are not synonymous with stereotypes. Yet media stereotyping does occur, and such stereotyping influences perceptions and attitudes, including those of both students and school educators. (p. 159)

The education system in the United States is structured to support European American values and beliefs, such as individualism and competition (Boykin, 2002), and these values are superimposed on its students. Many African Americans, specifically males, consider school's rigid structure as "White" and "uncool." For instance, African Americans who are successful in school may be seen by African American peers as an "oreo" or trying to act "White": in other words, a cultural sellout.

In *Barbershop*, Jimmy's "uncool" persona manifests itself in the movie because of his individualistic nature, preppy college boy attire, sardonic comments, arrogant attitude, exclusive scholastic vernacular and the condescending way he expresses his academic knowledge. Throughout the movie, the other barbers link Jimmy's patronizing attitude to higher education.

The focus on a character who has assimilated abets the polarization of African Americans in regard to education. Since assimilation is an option that is rejected by many African American males, because they perceive it as cultural suicide, the assimilation-positive nature of Jimmy further exacerbates the perception of higher

education in the mind of young African American males.

Ricky is seen as the exact opposite of Jimmy. In a society where the "thug" image is commodified in the media, the multiple-tattooed, cornrow-wearing, slang-talking, good-looking Ricky magnetizes the audience, but unfortunately, his character is poorly developed.

Ricky's character is developed just enough to allow the viewers to know that he is a two-time felon who is trying to make his life better. Nevertheless, the movie fails to



develop the character and show how Ricky plans to rise above the harsh street life.

The movie presents Ricky as stagnant and focuses on his gangster characteristics and does not show his actual intelligence. Jimmy makes it clear how much education he has with his extended vocabulary and knowledge. It is much later in the movie before Ricky gives a glimpse of his IQ when he corrects Jimmy about the proper classification of scallops.

Instead of further developing Ricky's education, the movie maintains the image that most African American males have about attaining a formal education and still being cool. Ricky's education is cloaked by the shadow of his gangster image, which prevents the stripping of his coolness.

The representation of cool in the African American community is stigmatizing to the pursuit of higher education. Young African American males feel that if they are making the grades and trying to better themselves intellectually, they may be rejected or isolated from their peers.

Barbershop, in the relationship between Jimmy and Ricky, only reiterates these feelings that are in African American youth today. Instead of perpetuating this problem that we are facing today, *Barbershop* had an opportunity to help depict a solution.

Ricky's charisma is appealing to the audience, so why not use this as a tool and show him striving for a higher education? This allows the audience to see that, yes, you can be cool, be accepted by your peers, and still be successful.

In conclusion, the representation of Jimmy and Ricky are complicit in the view of school, especially higher education, as negative, "non-African American" institutions in the eyes of young African American males.

Sociologist John Ogbu (1985) asserts: "developing a pragmatic attitude is essential in reducing the problem of disproportionate school failure, given the phenomenon of secondary cultural discontinuity" (p.66). *Barbershop's* depiction of the stereotypical college boy image, alongside the underdeveloped character of a reformed street hustler, does not aid in this important insight by Ogbu. If we are to reverse current trends, schools, the African American community, and the media must help by countering the pessimistic outlook of young African American males.

References

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Jason Hayes, Manjah Fernandez, and Aaron Bowser are preservice teachers and La Vonne I. Neal is an assistant professor of education, all at Southwestern University, Georgetown, Texas.