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## A New Look at Anger on Television

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*Dated*

This season's "Home Improvement" is advertised by ABC as the television show watched by more Americans than any other program. It would seem that most viewers know what's good for them: the show exemplifies the kind of family relations and values, the variety of emotional expression, the skills for anger management that can promote mental health and prevent violence and emotional disorders. What the Institute for Mental Health Initiatives<sup>1</sup> set out as its mission is being demonstrated in a popular, and presumably profitable, media offering. So much for the good news. How is the broad panoply of television offerings measuring up to its potential? On the darker side, to what extent is television polluting our air-waves and consequently our culture?

A project undertaken by the Cultural Indicators (CI) research team and the Institute for Mental Health Initiatives (IMHI) examined one critical aspect of entertainment programs: How do they depict anger, and how are skills demonstrated to diffuse anger and to prevent violence?

Charles Speilberger (1984) defined anger as an emotional state that consists of feelings of irritation, annoyance, fury, rage and heightened activation or arousal of the nervous system. Among the many risks associated with anger and chronic hostility are coronary heart disease, hypertension, psychopathology and violence (Friedman, 1992; Johnson,

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<sup>1</sup> A not-for-profit, non governmental organization in Washington D.C.

1990; Pierce, 1984). Unresolved hostility can be a factor in failed marriages (Beck, 1984) and careers. Moreover, suicide and homicide are sometimes the extreme expression of anger (Pierce, 1984). Suppressed anger incurs other risks as well; it deadens responsiveness, inhibits work effectiveness and productivity, and constricts creative endeavors (Bernardez, 1984).

Contrary to the general public belief that anger exchanges are uniformly negative expressions, conflict and anger can be perceived by both the angry person and the target to be beneficial under appropriate circumstances (Averill, 1984). Anger can provide an opportunity to make a grievance known, solve problems, correct an imbalance of power in a relationship and restore pride that has been reduced (Miller, 1983; Pierce, 1984; Inclan, 1984; Jackson, 1984). It contains the potential energy to effect change (Sparks, 1984). The reward for constructive expression and interchange of anger can be an improved emotional connection between people, a maintained sense of integrity and a safer feeling (Miller, 1984; Averill, 1984; Tavis, 1984). Whether the experience of anger is constructive or not depends on the use of specific skills.

The experts convened by IMHI have developed techniques designed to teach individuals positive ways to channel their anger. IMHI developed national campaigns on anger management that use the acronym, "RETHINK." Used in two such anger management campaigns, each letter of RETHINK stands for a specific anger management skill. When parents and children can manage their anger constructively, they become empowered with the ability to understand their own and others' feelings and to resolve conflict in a non-violent manner. Creative professionals can depict the skills a character uses in managing his anger. By trying to calm down and RETHINK, a character can:

**Recognize** when he is angry. Are there signs (i.e. physical reactions) that tell the character he is getting angry?

**Empathize** with the other person. Does the angry character step back during the anger attack and try to see things from the other person's point of view.

**Think** about the situation in another way. Does the angry character try to gain a new perspective on the situation by using humor, for example?

**Hear** the other person's feeling and point of view.

**Integrate** respect and love with the anger.

**Notice** what works for the angry character to regain control of his anger. What can the angry character do to calm himself? What can other characters do to help an angry character to calm himself?

**Keep** his attention on the present problem and alternative solutions without bringing up old grudges and wounds.

The above list represents a compilation of skills that, when used within an angry exchange, can provide for a potentially constructive outcome. Through the use of these skills, anger can be managed and relationships can be improved. Television can present its audiences with

characters who model positive anger management skills within the dramatic format. Individuals can learn how to use these skills by watching television and then imitating the behaviors.

Research suggests that television characters serve as models or objects of identification, and as such are able to influence behavior (Bandura, 1983; Pearl et al., 1982; Dorr, 1982). In fact, prosocial messages on television can have greater effects on behavior than antisocial messages (Friedlander, 1993). To the extent that TV characters exemplify different ways to express anger constructively, the coping capabilities of viewers may be enhanced.

Less studied and less understood are the many ideas about human interaction and human emotion that are presented to viewers every day. What models of behavior are shown on television? What can audiences learn from their television idols and mentors about every-day feelings and ways of expressing these emotions?

Recognizing the important role of the media, IMHI conducted the first content analysis of anger on prime time television in 1985. The study was part of a larger campaign to educate the public about constructive ways to manage anger. A follow-up study in 1989 showed changes in the portrayal of anger on television and helped to develop a standard method for scoring television programs according to their ability to show varied ways of managing anger.

The protocol IMHI developed to measure anger portrayal consisted of 50 items. The items include characteristics of the angry person and the target of anger, as well as the presence (or absence) of anger management skills utilized to resolve the conflict.

The analysis of prime time programs and daytime dramas has shown that when good anger management skills are integrated into entertainment

programs, they do not hinder the programs' Nielson ratings. Moreover, viewers may even be attracted to such skillful treatment of difficult situations.

## **Two divergent perspectives**

When two divergent perspectives join forces in a study of television, its content and impact, the real life drama begins and sparks fly. The differences between George Gerbner's Cultural Indicators Team and that of IMHI can be simplified by stating that CI is focused on the pollution of the air waves and IMHI recognizes the opportunity of the mass media to enhance the public's well-being.

CI focuses on an aggregate view of the problem and on understanding the general cultural territory. It is their view that without such understanding, even the most skillful intervention is likely to fail or to have short-lived success. Furthermore, when working with television professionals, only such an aggregate view can address problems that dramatic formulas pose for writers and directors. From this broad view, we can discuss how to overcome such problems as violence in the media.

IMHI, on the other hand, recognizes the importance of the particulars. Each character, each interaction, and each scene within each program has the power to affect a reaction in the viewer. It is important, then, to break the programs into small units of analysis in order to understand how characters relate to each other and what kinds of social behavior they are demonstrating.

## **CURRENT STUDY**

The current study involves the analysis of 121 prime time and 38

Saturday morning children's programs, a total of 159 programs aired on four television networks during the 1993-94 season. A total of 1,014 "anger scenes" were found and analyzed according to the categories devised by the IMHI.

The analysis was conducted by the Cultural Indicators (CI) research team, led by George Gerbner, at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. CI is an ongoing research project that monitors television and relates it to viewers' conceptions of reality. While working closely with the experts at IMHI, Gerbner and his researchers worked to gain an understanding of the portrayal of anger in television.

Anger was observed as an overt expression affecting a character physiologically, cognitively, or behaviorally. Out of 1,926 characters analyzed, 25.9% expressed anger. Their characteristics and ways of expressing and/or managing anger were observed and tabulated. The overall reliability of observations was 96% agreement between the coders.

## RESULTS

In this study, anger is frequently seen on television. Almost three fourths of all prime time programs and all Saturday morning children's programs contain anger scenes. More than nine out of ten prime time action programs, nearly as many situation comedies, and over half of general drama programs contain anger scenes. There is probably no comparable source of information about expressions of anger in our culture.

In prime time programs, about one fourths of all characters and half of major characters express anger. In Saturday morning children's

programs one third of all characters and two thirds of major characters express anger. Clearly, these programs offer a major opportunity to teach about anger.

### **Demography of anger**

Characters most likely to express anger are major rather than minor, male rather than female, upscale rather than lower class, whites rather than characters of color, and boys (male children and adolescents) rather than most other age and gender groups.

When angry women become violent, they are more likely to be victimized than men. On a larger scale, for every 100 angry female characters who are violent, 162 angry females get hurt. Yet for every 100 angry male characters who become violent, only 82 angry males get hurt.

Saturday morning children's programs not only feature more anger than prime time programs, but the differences in anger expression across gender, class, and age groups tends to be wider. For example, out of all the characters on Saturday morning programs, 107 males express anger while only 27 females do. 75 white characters express anger, while only 4 characters of color do. The majority of characters who express anger on Saturday morning programs are adults, with relatively few children or elderly getting angry.

### **Violence and anger**

There is a split in the professional community about defining certain types of behavior as violent. Violence is generally defined as "an act intended to harm something or someone." When violence is embedded in a meaningful context, then the viewer has an opportunity to learn from the portrayals. Harmful TV violence is extracted from a meaningful context

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and is sanitized so that the tragic consequences are not depicted.

Not all anger involves violence and not all violence involves anger, but six out of ten programs involve both. Anger that culminates in violence occurs in half of prime time and nine tenths of Saturday morning children's programs. Within these shows, however, only 14.6 percent of anger scenes on prime time and 36.2 percent of anger scenes on Saturday mornings involve violence. Thus, while many shows have violence in them, the same shows portray anger being handled in non-violent ways.

Nearly half of prime time programs contain scenes of anger where the outcome is not violent and angry characters manage their anger almost 2/3 of the time. Female characters are more likely than males to use anger management skills such as listening, recognizing one's own anger, and finding humor in the situation. Males and females also used self-talk as a way of managing anger.

Although the majority of Saturday morning children's programs contain scenes with both anger and violence, in fact only a little more than a third of the anger scenes in Saturday morning programs culminate in violence. Characters on Saturday morning children's programs are recognizing their anger 26.9 percent of the time and listening to their target of anger 30.6 percent of the time. Both of these anger management skills are part of IMHI's RETHINK program. Characters also use skills such as self-talk and finding humor in the situation. The top three ways that characters vent their anger on Saturday morning programs are all non-violent, verbal expressions of anger such as shouting, blaming, and threatening. Thirty seven percent of angry characters respond by hurting the target while only 12.6 percent break or destroy something.

While this study reported significantly more violence in Saturday morning children's programs than in prime time programs, there was

practically no fatal violence in these programs. The amount of non-fatal violence was much higher. IMHI questions whether the kind of slapstick violence that is often portrayed on cartoons should be considered significantly violent. Does this sort of head bopping have the same effect on its viewers as the kind of glamorized and graphic violence that is also seen on television? For the purposes of this study, however, there was no distinction made between different kinds of violence. X

The study did report, however, that much violence on television is "cool" and does not involve anger or perhaps any kind of emotion. Only one-third of prime time violence and one-fourth of Saturday morning violence involves expressions of anger. X

### **Venting anger**

Other manifestations of anger in prime time range from shouting, blaming, insulting, saying "unfair", threatening, crying, cursing, and breaking things.

There is a substantial gender difference in the characters' expression of anger. Male characters are more likely to shout, break, threaten, hurt, and curse; female characters are more likely to blame, insult, say "unfair," and cry. Males are also more likely to run away, thereby avoiding the angry situation altogether. Every manifestation of anger is amplified in Saturday morning children's programs.

### **Managing anger**

Six out of ten prime time and four out of ten Saturday morning children's program characters use anger management skills in a conflict situation. Characters who attempt resolution do so by listening to the target of their anger, reflecting on their own anger, finding humor in the

situation, or talking to themselves about it.

When controlling or managing anger is allowed to slow the action, it is more likely to be done by female characters than by male characters. More female characters listen to the target of their anger, recognize their own anger, and find humor in the situation. Saturday morning children's programs feature more anger and even less anger management than prime time programs. The major, and perhaps most ironic, difference is that significantly few characters on Saturday morning programs are able to find humor in an anger scene.

The first step in anger management is recognition of anger and almost half of female characters on Saturday morning programs do so. In fact, these characters are more than twice as likely as their male counterparts to recognize their own anger. In prime time shows, male and female characters are equally skilled with respect to recognizing their own anger. However, recognizing anger is not sufficient in itself. Other important anger management skills include "self-talk," which helps to calm the self in an angry situation, listening to the target of the anger, and finding humor in the situation.

Before IMHI began its campaign, the stereotypical depiction of anger resulted in immediate translation of violence or running away: the "fight or flight" response. The current statistics show that running away and avoiding anger is not a frequent occurrence on prime time or Saturday morning shows.

## **Gender issues**

The inhibition of anger expression by women in our society has been noted as a problem by researchers (Miller; Bernardez, 1984). The manifestations of the problem are seen in depression, deadening of

emotions, impaired relationships, suppression of creativity and social problems such as runaways, drugs, and teenage pregnancy.

Because television has the potential to model constructive portrayals of anger, IMHI began to look at anger as depicted by each gender, starting in 1985. In daytime dramas, female characters were nearly as likely as male characters to express anger. Of 591 angry characters in a 1990 study, 278 were female and 313 were male. This represents an increase in the percentage of anger events involving males, from 46 percent in 1986 to 53 percent in 1990.

Another study by IMHI looked at prime time shows in 1985. For these programs, 77 percent of angry characters were male and 23 percent were female. By 1989, in a follow-up study, the genders showed more equal expression of anger. In both prime time and day time television, there seems to be a trend toward a more equal distribution of anger expression by gender.

## DISCUSSION

Television plays a major role in our society. Approximately 98 percent of American households have television, with many of the homes having multiple sets (Huston et al., 1992). Within these homes the television is on about 28 hours a week for children 2-11 years of age and 23 hours for teenagers. We now know that children spend more time watching TV than they do on any other non-school activity.

The television viewer sees anger in three out of four prime time programs and in all Saturday morning children's programs. Because anger is such an integral part of these programs, viewers have many opportunities to learn about anger expression and management. The

lessons that dramatic formulas may hold for viewers convey a sense of dynamic relationships: how things may work behind the scenes of everyday life, who are the winners and the losers, who can get away with what against whom, what is the most effective way to deal with anger and frustration in everyday life. The struggle for TV writers is to create entertaining characters and plots that will also serve as constructive role models for healthy relationships and anger management.

Although there is still a good deal of uncontrolled anger and violence on television, progress has been made in the prevalence of anger management on television. Writers and producers appear to be incorporating some of IMHI's RETHINK skills into their programs.

Some might view the reported amount of violence in Saturday morning children's programs as a cause for alarm. However, it is encouraging to note that in these same shows there is a good deal of anger management. While most shows on Saturday morning programs may have violence in them, not all of the individual anger scenes will culminate in violence. Thus, violence may not be presented in these shows as the only way to deal with anger. Characters vent their anger in non-violent ways and manage their anger more often than not.

Overall, there has been an improvement in the portrayal of anger management skills on prime time programs. More than half of all characters manage their anger and less than one third become violent when angry. Fewer female characters get angry than male characters, but this is largely due to the fact that there are not nearly as many female characters being portrayed on television. Percentage-wise, the gender distribution of anger is fairly equitable, yet there are still deficiencies in some of the demographics of anger expression (i.e. the expression of anger by characters of color).

IMHI has been working with the creative community in an attempt to enhance the portrayal of emotional issues on television and to present many different behavioral options. Through *Dialogue: Insights into Human Emotions for Creative Professionals*, a publication that is sent to over 12,000 members of the creative community, IMHI conveys information about particular issues and ways to handle those issues in scripts.

### **Implications for the creative community**

How can the media create exciting and popular programming and new technology while simultaneously communicating messages that will help maintain a healthy and less violent society? Is violence imperative to creating thrilling drama? By creating compelling programming that contains authentic emotional responses, the audience will be attracted because the program will resonate with the viewers' concerns and interests.

Conflict and anger can be shown constructively by showing variety in the kinds of people who get angry, portraying the different triggers of anger, and depicting various skills of anger management.<sup>2</sup>

### **Implications for the public**

As we encourage the industry to improve the content of programming, we can also change the way children approach and view TV. Television provides an opportunity for parents to help their children become "emotionally literate," to counteract the impact of violence, and to develop healthy and appropriate emotional responses to various situations. When children learn to identify and talk about emotional responses such

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<sup>2</sup> IMHI has created guidelines for the media on how to constructively portray anger and violence in television programs.

as anger, they have achieved the first step in managing their behavior.<sup>3</sup>

### **Implications for researchers**

To implement a public health approach, we need to evaluate existing research and determine what further research needs to be done on the effect of various media products. We know that people are not entertained in a vacuum. People respond to what they hear and see. Their heart rate increases and adrenalin flows, etc. However, we need to know specifically *how* individuals are effected psychologically, behaviorally, and emotionally. Are all people effected in the same way or are there differences? What is the nature of the violence in the program and whom does it impact? What are the autonomic responses to viewing violent content? How does desensitization to such content occur? Like addicts, do viewers need greater levels of stimulation to achieve the same level of response?

Where this study focused only on the portrayal of anger expression on television programs, future studies might look at other areas of social importance, focusing on the conflict between impulse management and impulse expression. Also, since IMHI has been feeding ideas to writers through *Dialogue*, studies might be conducted on the portrayal of some other issues presented in the *Dialogue*, such as stereotyping, fear, risk taking, and romantic relationships.

Future studies might also explore further the demography of anger expression and management. How is anger expressed differently with respect to race, social class, and age? Is there a difference in the way cartoon characters express anger and are the effects on audiences different? What is the nature of the violence on television (especially on

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<sup>3</sup> IMHI created the Anger Episode Checklist which allows viewers to identify different options for resolving conflict depicted in a show.

Saturday morning children's programs)? Studies might also look at popular films with similar issues in mind.

With the rising social and political consciousness of the television content, studies like these can help to assess where television stands now and what specific changes in programming need to be made in order to ensure that its viewers receive constructive messages and that the programs still get good ratings.



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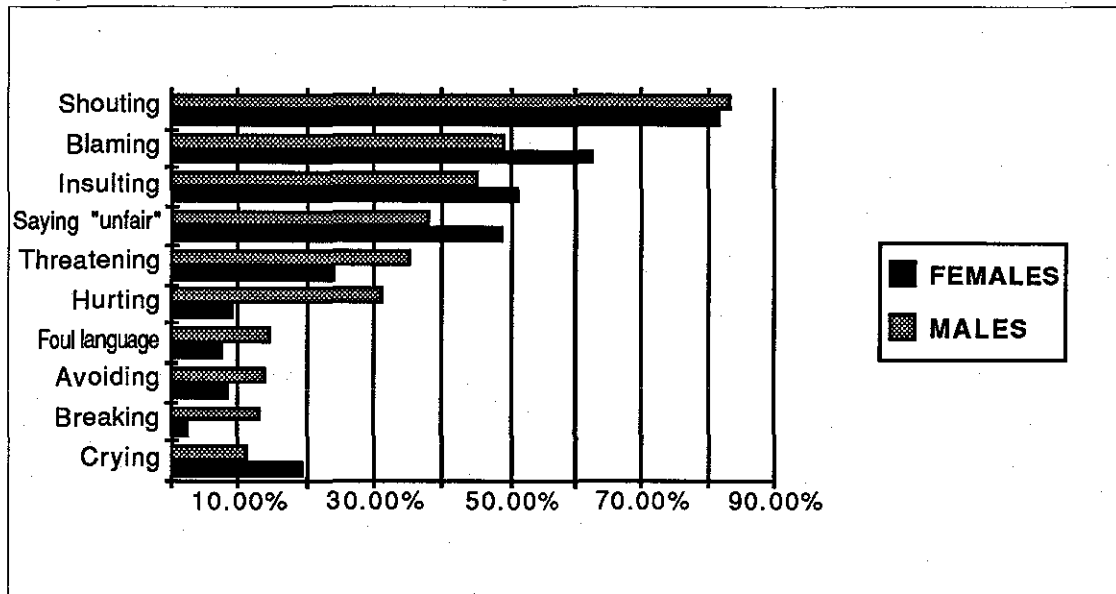
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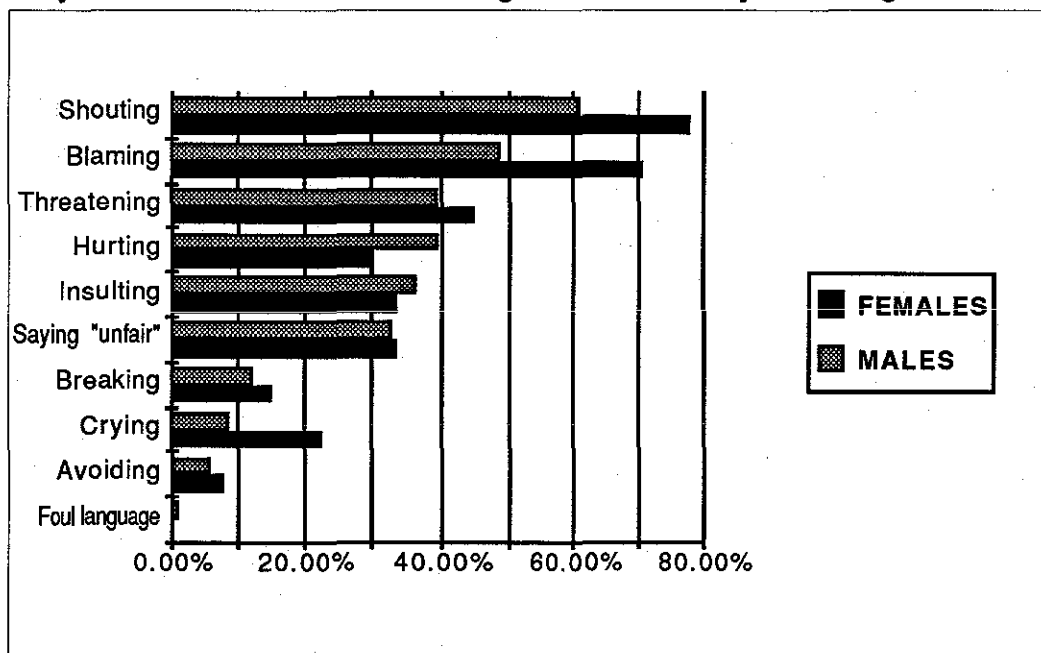
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## VENTING ANGER

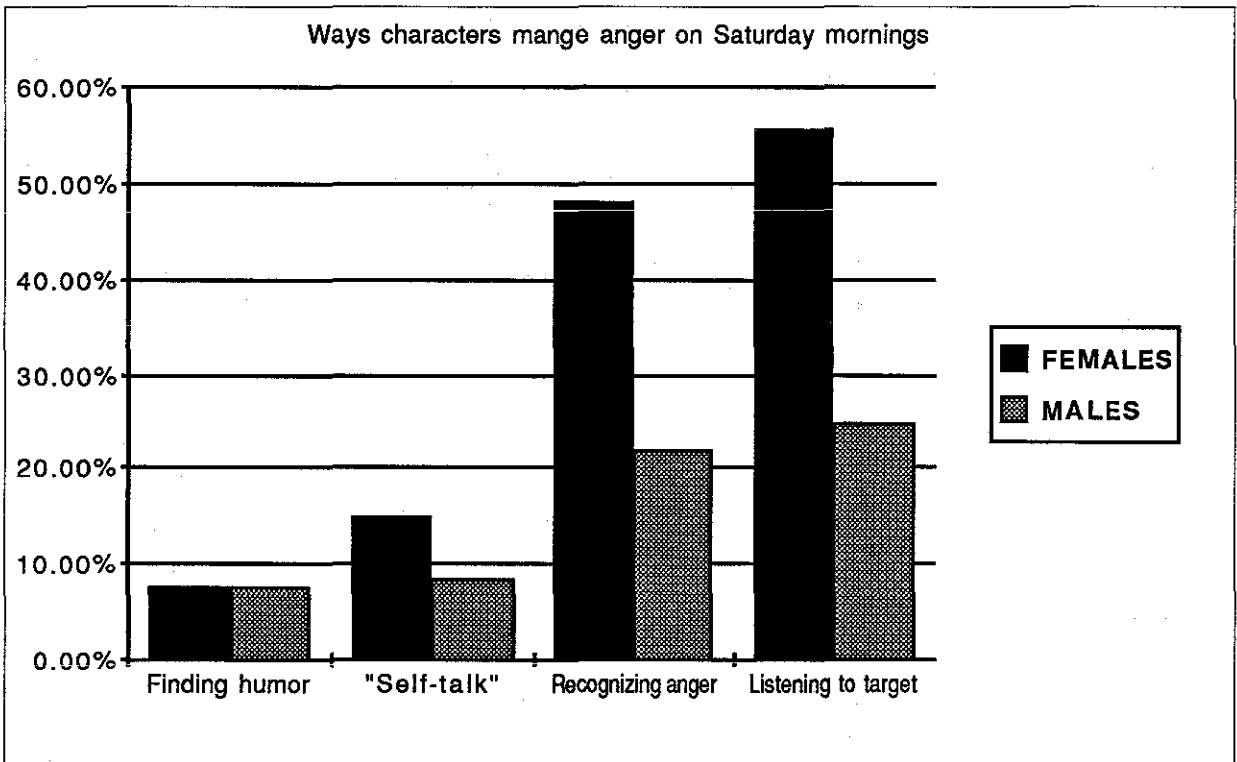
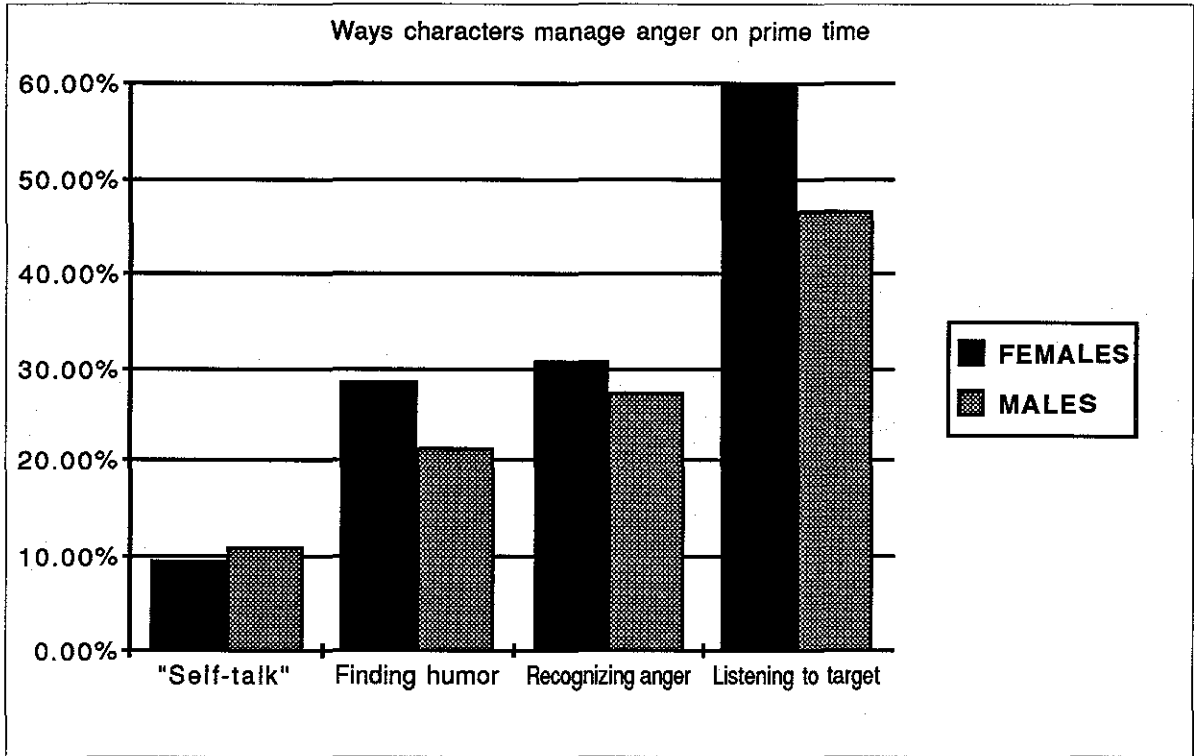
Ways that characters vent anger on prime time television:



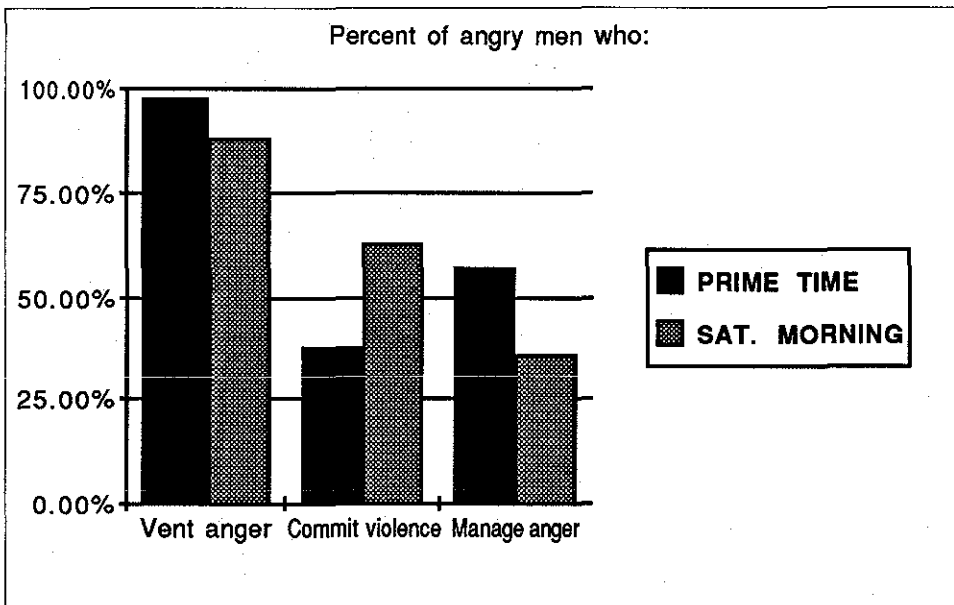
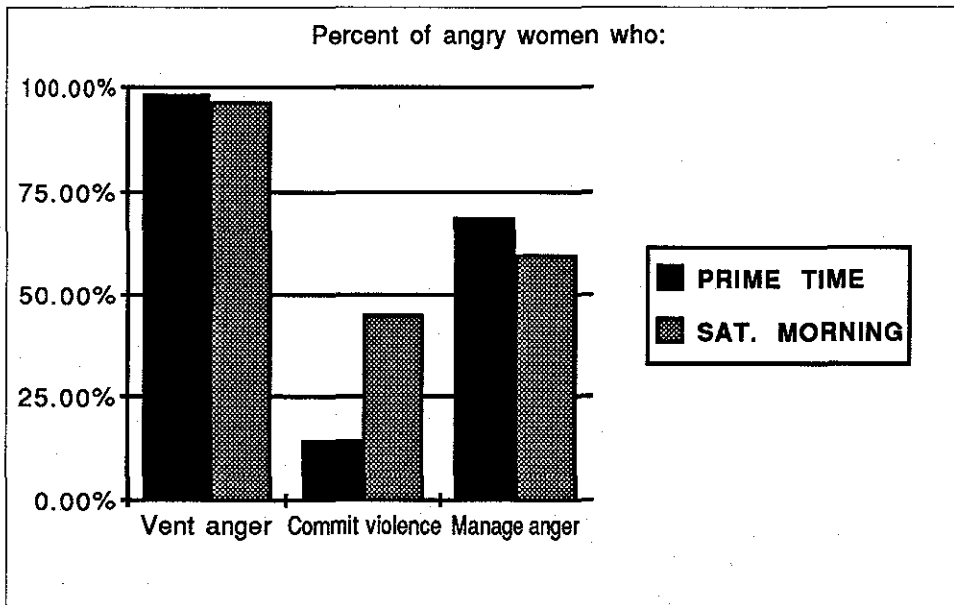
Ways that characters vent anger on Saturday morning television:



# MANAGING ANGER

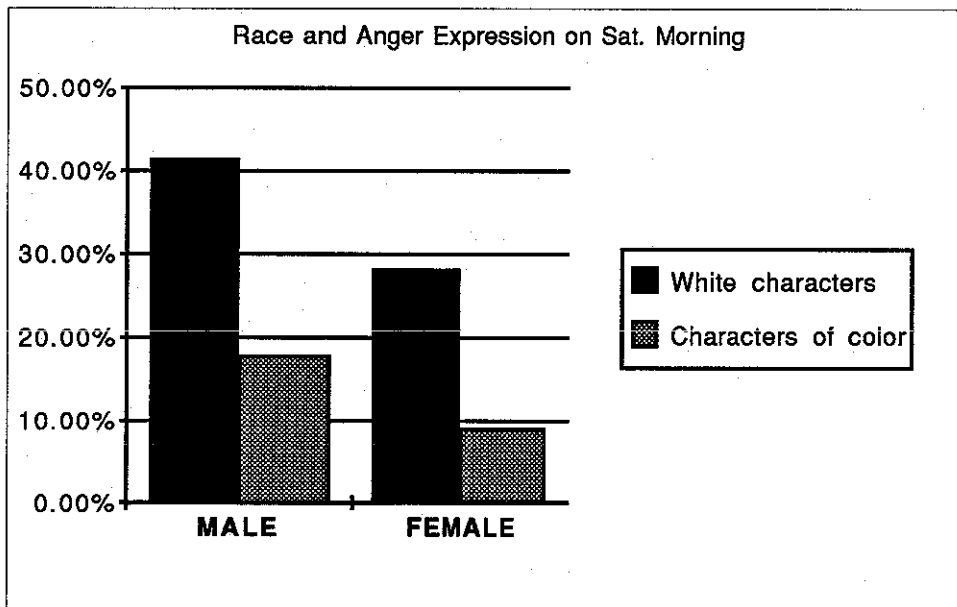
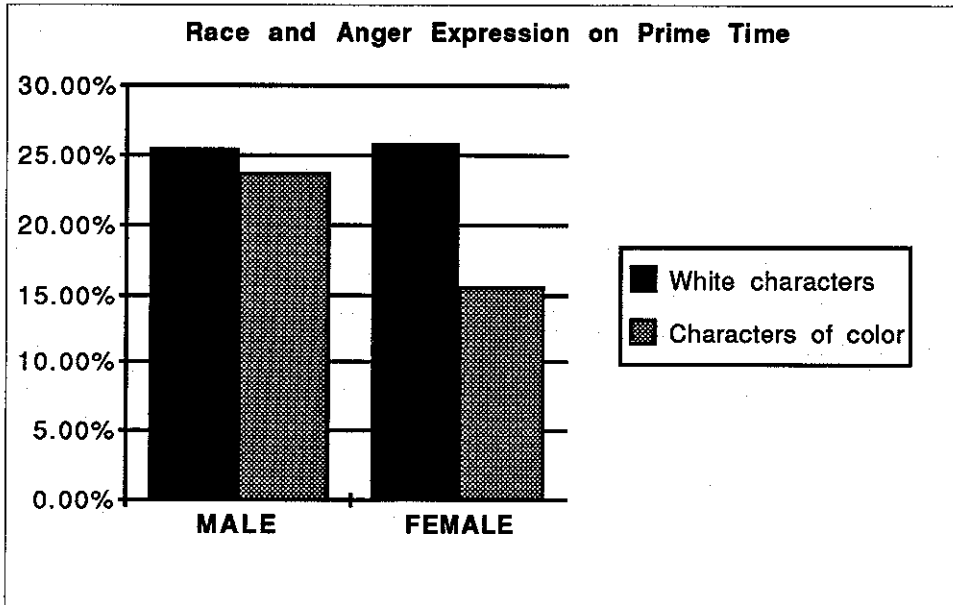


# GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ANGER EXPRESSION



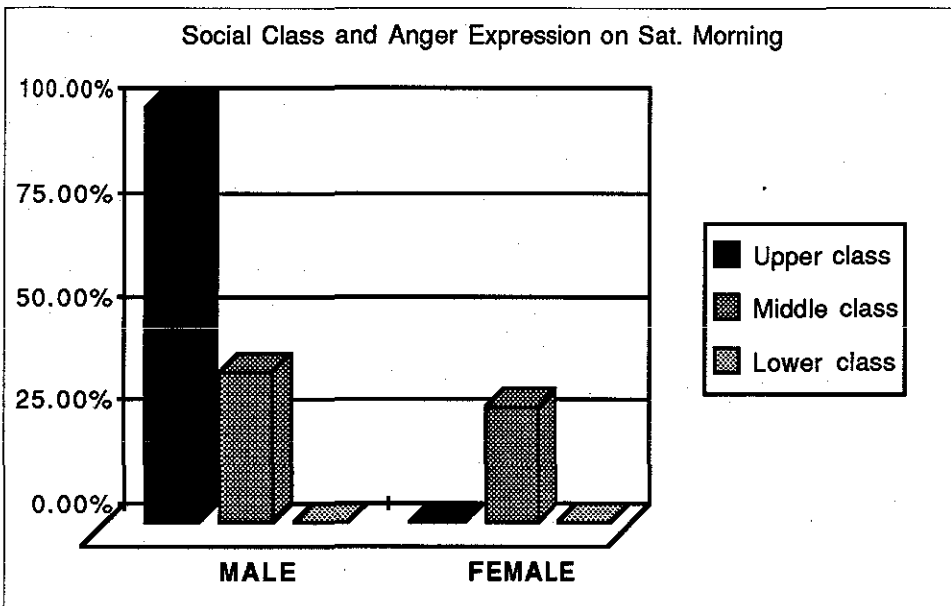
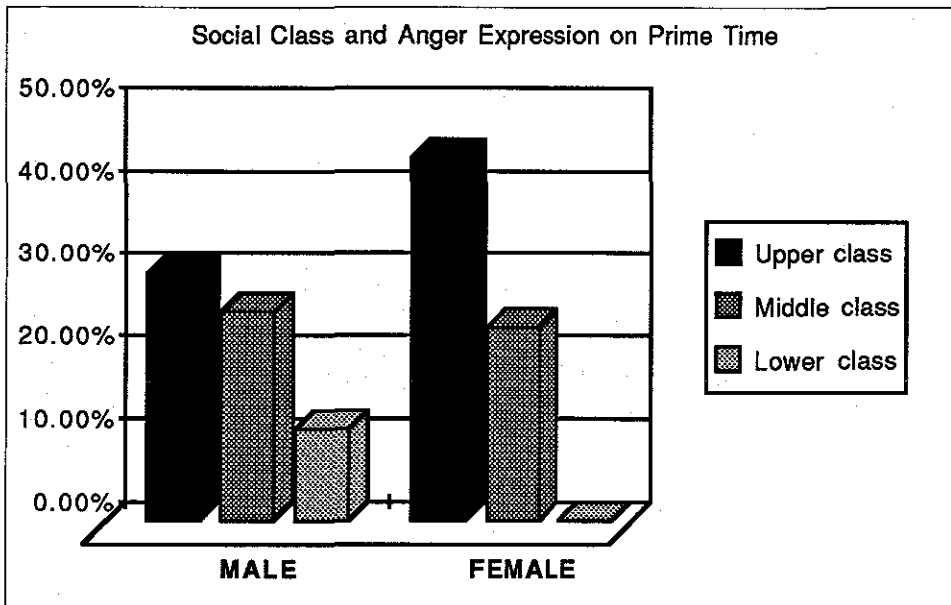
# RACE AND ANGER EXPRESSION

Percent of characters who express anger:



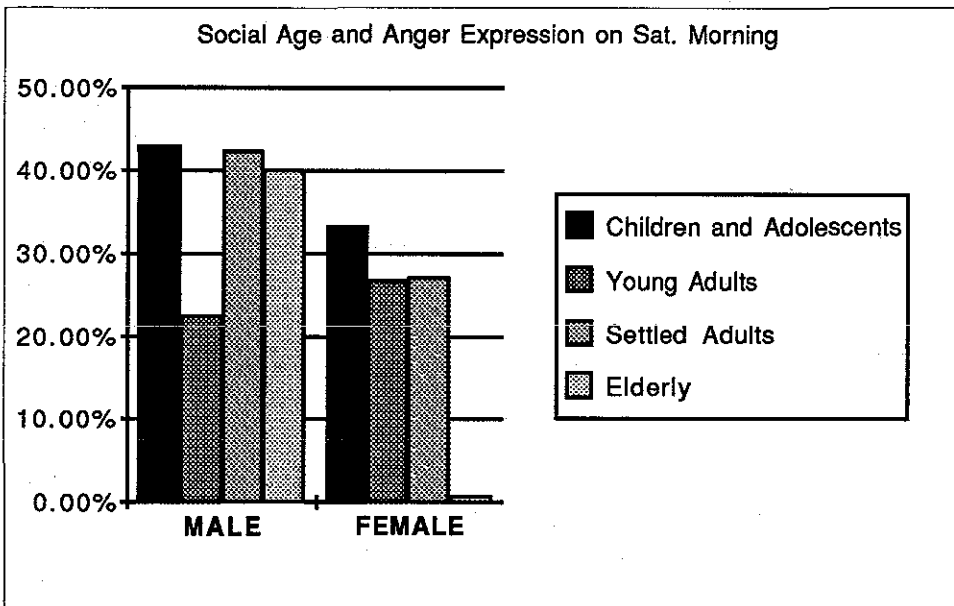
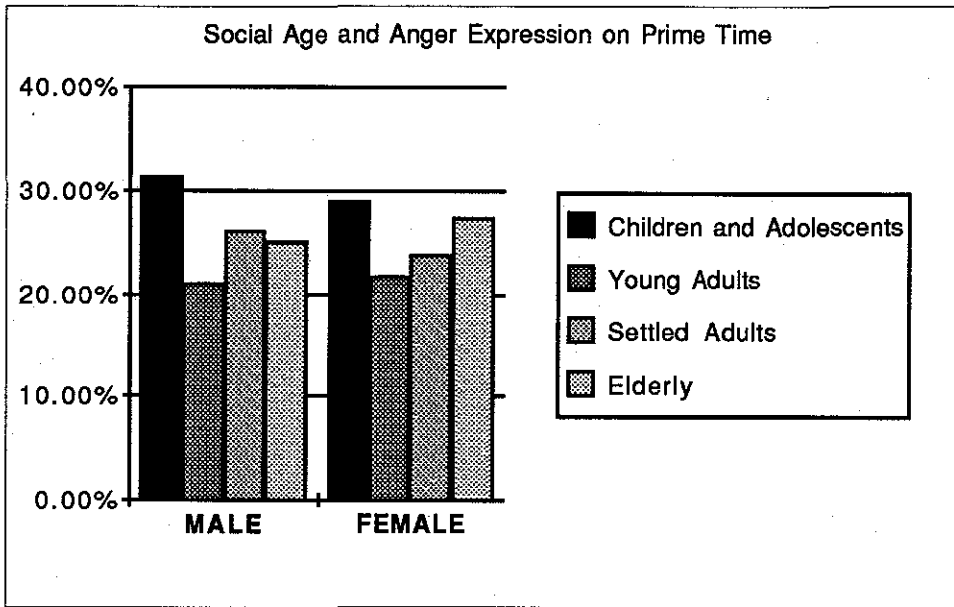
# SOCIAL CLASS AND ANGER EXPRESSION

Percent of characters in each range who express anger:



# SOCIAL AGE AND ANGER EXPRESSION

Percent of characters from each age range who express anger:



# NETWORK COMPARISON:

