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Gender and Age in Prime-Time Television

George Gerbner

Humans grow up and live in a world erected by the stories we tell. The storytelling process of a culture functions to socialize children, to define their world and their roles, and to indicate their powers and risks. The most essential building blocks of this exercise in casting and fate are gender and age. And its most critical defining characteristic has been a historic transformation in the storytelling.

That transformation has occurred over the past 30 years. The shift has been marked by a trend away from stories being told mostly by parents, schools and churches, and other traditional socializing agencies toward stories being delivered by a group of highly concentrated and globalized corporate "content providers" who have things to sell. The mainstream of that process is television. Today's children are born into homes in which a television is on over 7 hours a day. Who is cast in what role and assigned what fate in the world of television sends the

most pervasive messages to our children about life's values, rewards, penalties, and risks.

The most compelling part of that process, and the part that dominates early socialization, is prime-time dramatic programs. Unlike fragmented and opaque "facts," drama takes us behind the scenes and shows how things are supposed to work. It deals in coherent ways with key questions of existence: What is the world like? What is my role in it? How do I relate to others? What fate may be in store for me?

The typical child viewer sees each week about 353 characters in prime-time dramatic programs, both serious and humorous. Never before have children been so consistently exposed to such a range of human types and situations. That is the new context in which gender and aging as social roles are learned.

Although the fictional world of television is often realistic, it is never real but contrived, selective, and synthetic. Its overall patterns of casting and fate reflect the formulas of their production. Casting defines the types of characters who populate the world of television, fate defines their destiny.

This report is based on an analysis of 20 years (from 1973 through 1993) of prime-time major network dramatic entertainment programs (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). A brief note will summarize Saturday morning children's programming patterns that occupy approximately one fifth of a child's viewing time. Additional information comes from the Annenberg Script Archive, containing scripts of dramatic programs aired on television.

The study was conducted by the Cultural Indicators (CI) project research team under the direction of the author.[1] It was designed to reveal aggregate patterns of images and messages that large communities absorb over long periods of time. The annual samples consist of all dramatic programs and all speaking parts aired on the four networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox) for a typical week for each season. The samples were recorded and coded by a group of trained observers using an

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[1] CI is an ongoing long-range research project that monitors television content and relates it to viewers' conceptions of reality. The project began at the University of Pennsylvania's The Annenberg School for Communication and continues at the University City Science Center in Philadelphia. Nejat Ozyegin has directed data processing. Coding supervisers and coordinators have been Elvira Arcenas, S. Marcus Hswe, Jennifer Luk, Ilicia Stangle, and Sheila Witherington. Leah Binder assisted with the special script analysis.

instrument of analysis and subjected to periodic reliability testing. All aggregate information comes from the CI database.

The samples included a total of 2,452 programs and 1,596 program hours. All speaking parts, a total of 30,952 characters, were analyzed (see Table 1). They are tabulated in two types of age categories. The first classification is under 18, 18–44, 45–64 ("midlife"), and 65 and over. When the focus on specific roles reduces the number of characters involved, the comparisons are made in two broader adult categories: "young," judged to be 18 through 44, and "midlife and older" (or just "older"), playing roles of 45 years and above. "Major characters," tabulated separately, are those judged to be essential to the plot.

Table 1

Programs, Program Hours, and Characters Analyzed

		Programs		
		Prime Time	Sat a.m.	Totals
Networks				
ABC		458	256	714
CBS		491	402	893
NBC		462	290	752
FOX		67	26	93
Total		1,478	974	2,452
Program hours				
ABC		387	86	473
CBS		440	107	547
NBC		434	90	523
FOX		44	9	53
Total		1,304	292	1,596
All characters	N	22,611	8,341	30,952
Males	%	68.2	74.3	69.8
Females	%	31.5	20.3	28.5
Indeterminate	%	0.3	5.4	1.7
Major characters	N	4,068	2,426	6,494
Males	%	66.9	79.6	71.7
Females	%	32.9	16.3	26.7
Indeterminate	%	0.2	4.1	1.7

This chapter focuses on comparisons of gender and age, both in general demographic and in some specific dramatic roles. It addresses these questions: How are characters of different ages and genders represented on television? What are the associations of these portrayals with different class, race, health, and other dramatic roles? What are the potential lessons of the television experience for growing up male or female and for aging as a social role?

The Aggregate Analysis

Age on television is a resource defined by dramatic formulas of gender and role (see Table 2). Female roles are less than one third of the prime-time character population. Although their percentage increased from 27.6 to 36.1 in 20 years, the proportion of midlife and older women remained approximately 15% of female characters, about half of the true proportion of the 45-and-over U.S. female population.

As television characters age, their proportional representation declines. Women's share declines faster than men's. For every 10 midlife males, there are 23 young males. But for every 10 midlife females, there are 46 young females. In other words, females tend to be concentrated in the younger age groups and "age faster" than men. The gender imbalance is especially striking in midlife: For every midlife female, a viewer sees nearly four midlife males.

After age 65, representation declines even further. The 20-year average of both genders aged 65 and above is 2.2 percent of the dramatic television population, which is about one fifth of the comparable U.S. population.

The pattern for major characters (see Table 3) shows that leading parts for older characters, and especially for older women, are even more scarce.

Saturday morning children's programs, not tabulated here, further extend but do not alter the prime-time pattern. The proportion of children and adolescents is of course higher than in prime-time. The corresponding decrease in the proportion of adults reduces midlife female characters from 15.5% in primetime to 10.6% in Saturday morning children's programs. The imbalance is even greater for major characters. Older women in leading roles are virtually absent. The child viewer sees about nine times as many major midlife male characters as major midlife female characters.

Table 2

Trends in Prime Time: Ages and Genders of All Characters

		1973–78	1978–83	1983–88	1988–93	Totals 1973–93
Totals						
Male	%	72.4	69.0	67.9	64.9	68.5
Female	%	27.6	31.0	32.8	35.1	31.5
Age						
Under 18						
Male		6.3	8.1	7.0	11.4	8.1
Female		12.1	12.6	11.3	16.2	13.1
18–44						
Male		65.8	60.7	63.6	60.5	62.7
Female		69.0	69.1	72.4	66.0	69.2
45–64						
Male		25.9	29.2	27.6	25.2	27.1
Female		17.0	15.9	14.3	15.2	15.5
65 and over						
Male		2.0	2.0	1.9	2.9	2.2
Female		1.9	2.4	2.1	2.6	2.2

Note. Percents are of gender within age groups. For example, the first column "Under 18" should read "6.3 percent of all males and 12.1 percent of all females are under 18."

Romance and Marriage

Romance is rampant in prime time. It dominates the lives of young women. It prevails through midlife for men but not for women. CI data (not tabulated here) show that over one third of young males and two thirds of young females are involved in romance. In midlife, the roles change. One out of five midlife and older males encounter romance. However, a negligible number (less than 1%) of midlife and older women experience a romantic relationship.

Not surprisingly, marriage is a more defining circumstance for women than it is for men (see Table 4). Men's roles on television are

Table 3

Trends in Prime Time: Major Characters by Age and Gender, 1973–1993

		1973–78	1978–83	1983–88	1988–93	Totals 1973–93
Totals						
Male	%	71.3	66.0	64.3	65.0	66.9
Female	%	28.8	34.0	35.7	35.0	33.1
Age						
Under 18						
Male		6.3	7.5	7.9	14.6	8.4
Female		9.7	11.6	9.3	14.5	11.0
18–44						
Male		65.2	60.0	63.9	59.7	62.5
Female		71.9	72.1	73.3	72.0	72.4
45–64						
Male		26.9	30.6	25.8	22.7	27.0
Female		17.7	14.6	15.1	12.1	15.1
65 and over						
Male		1.6	1.8	2.4	3.0	2.1
Female		.7	1.7	2.3	1.4	1.6

centered on a great variety of lifestyles to which marital status is not relevant. Therefore, more men than women in all age categories appear in roles whose marital status is indeterminate. Conversely, more women than men are characterized as married, twice as many for young and midlife women. However, older married men are more likely to play leading parts than older married women.

Class and Race

"Class" was determined by isolating "clearly upper"—obviously wealthy or high society—and "clearly lower"—visibly poor—from the large and indistinct "middle class." The class structure of gender and age is peculiar (see Table 5). A larger percentage of women than men are clearly "upper class" in each age group. The proportion of upscale

Table 4

Marital Status of Prime-Time Characters, 1973–1993

	All characters			Major characters		
	Male	Female	Totals	Male	Female	Totals
Age						
18–44						
Indeterminate	71.4	47.2	63.3	28.0	12.7	22.4
Not Married	20.7	35.9	25.8	55.7	63.9	58.7
Married	7.8	16.9	10.9	16.3	23.4	18.9
45–64						
Indeterminate	73.9	48.6	68.6	36.1	20.7	32.8
Not Married	11.8	20.2	13.5	33.6	40.8	35.1
Married	14.4	31.3	17.9	30.3	38.6	32.1
65 and over						
Indeterminate	58.3	45.9	54.3	23.1	10.5	19.7
Not Married	25.1	33.6	27.8	50.0	68.4	54.9
Married	16.6	20.5	17.9	26.9	21.1	25.4

women rises with age and importance of role. As midlife major characters, rich women are 16.3% of all midlife women, the highest of all age groups, compared with 13.0% of men. As older major characters, rich women are 10.5% compared to 1.9% of older men.

"Lower class" women, however, are less visible than lower class men. Poor older women are virtually absent from the world of television, despite the fact that in real life they outnumber poor older men.

Television has more roles for older African American females than for males, though none of them poor. Other racial minorities are virtually invisible at any age (see Table 6).

Health

Despite all the mayhem in prime time (most of it painless), injury and illness are rare (see Table 7). Only one of four major characters suffers from any kind of health problem, handicap, or disability.

Table 5

Socioeconomic Status of Characters, 1973–1993

	All characters			Major characters		
	Male	Female	Totals	Male	Female	Totals
Age						
18–44						
Clearly Upper	2.7	5.0	3.5	6.6	9.4	7.6
Middle	94.0	93.5	93.8	90.4	88.7	89.88
Clearly Lower	1.5	.6	1.1	2.1	1.4	1.8
45–64						
Clearly Upper	5.9	7.7	6.3	13.0	16.3	13.7
Middle	91.6	89.1	91.0	84.6	81.5	84.0
Clearly Lower	1.3	2.3	1.5	2.3	1.1	2.0
65 and over						
Clearly Upper	4.9	7.0	5.6	1.9	10.5	4.2
Middle	88.6	89.5	88.9	86.5	78.9	84.5
Clearly Lower	2.4		1.7	7.7		5.0

Infirmity generally rises with old age, but, unlike in life, older women are more likely to be shown disabled than men. While 26.3% of female characters aged 65 and over suffer from some disability, only 19.2% of the males do. How some of these configurations work out in the shows themselves will be shown later in the script analysis.

Fate

The moral force of popular fiction and drama is in its allocation of destiny. Unlike in life, television viewers learn the final outcome quickly and clearly. Who are the heroes and the villains, the victims and the victimizers? What is each group's calculus of risk as they grow old?

The answers to these questions are based on the 20-year totals of those characters whose depictions were reliably codable in terms of clear indicators of fate. For each set of indicators, two measures are used. The first is the percentage of characters within each gender and

Table 6

Race and Ethnicity of Characters, 1973–1993

Age	All Characters Male %	All Characters Female %	All Characters Totals %	Major Characters Male %	Major Characters Female %	Major Characters Totals %
Under 18						
White American	78.6	85.3	81.5	75.1	90.2	81.0
African American	18.9	13.4	16.5	21.2	8.2	16.1
Hispanic/Latino	1.6	.7	1.2	2.1		1.3
Asian/Pacific	.8	.5	.6	1.1	.8	1.0
Native American	.1	.2	.1	.5	.8	.6
18–44						
White American	83.7	86.9	84.9	87.7	92.0	89.3
African American	13.0	10.9	12.3	9.6	6.7	8.5
Hispanic/Latino	1.8	.8	1.4	1.8	.7	1.4
Asian/Pacific	1.1	1.2	1.1	.5	.5	.5
Native American	.3	.2	.3	.5	.1	.3
45–64						
White American	92.1	87.2	91.0	92.1	85.1	90.5
African American	6.1	11.2	7.2	7.1	14.3	8.7
Hispanic/Latino	.8	.7	.8	.7	.6	.6
Asian/Pacific	.8	.6	.8	.2		.1
Native American	.2	.3	.2			
65 and over						
White American	88.8	84.3	87.2	85.7	88.2	86.4
African American	9.2	15.7	11.4	10.2	11.8	10.6
Hispanic/Latino						
Asian/Pacific	.5		.3			
Native American	1.5		1.0	4.1		3.0

age group whose fate is presented in unambiguous terms. The second is the relative ratio obtained by dividing the number of positive by the number of negative indicators. The first measure shows the percents of different age and gender groups being cast in the different roles; the second measure, the relative ratio, indicates the "price" each group pays for being cast in a positive role.

Table 7
Injuries and Illnesses of Major Characters, 1973–1993

	Male %	Female %	Total %
PHYSICAL INJURY			
Under 18	10.7	2.6	7.5
18–44	7.0	5.2	6.3
45–64	7.9	5.7	7.4
65 and over	22.6	18.8	21.3
PHYSICAL ILLNESS			
Under 18	9.2	6.0	7.9
18–44	6.8	5.8	6.4
45–64	7.8	8.2	7.9
65 and over	17.3	15.8	16.9
MENTAL ILLNESS			
Under 18	1.9	2.2	2.1
18–44	4.1	3.5	3.9
45–64	2.4	1.1	2.1
65 and over		5.3	1.4
ANY DISABILITY			
Under 18	15.6	9.1	13.1
18–44	11.3	9.6	10.7
45–64	10.7	10.0	10.6
65 and over	19.2	26.3	21.1

Heroes and Villains

Older characters are as likely as younger characters to be cast in positive parts ("heroes"), but less likely to be cast as "villains" (see Table 8). Class and race make a difference in that the few older, lower class, and African American characters who are seen at all are the most likely to get positive roles. Villainy, on the other hand, is most likely to be young, upper class, male, and White.

When major roles are analyzed, however, aging tends to reduce chances of being "good" in both genders, and increase chances of being "bad" among men (see Table 9). The most likely to play evil roles are

Table 8

Heroes, Villains, and Ratios: All Characters, 1973–1993

	n total	% Heroes	% Villains	Ratio of villains to heroes (per 100)
MALE, 18–44	8,868	27.5	13.9	51
MALE, 45 & over	4,139	25.9	11.5	45
FEMALE, 18–44	4,489	31.3	4.5	14
FEMALE, 45 & over	1,153	31.3	5.6	18
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS (1983–1993)				
MALE, 18–44				
Upper class	73	19.2	30.1	157
Middle class	2,566	23.4	12.4	53
Lower class	40	17.5	20.0	114
MALE, 45 & over				
Upper class	74	20.3	24.3	120
Middle class	1,164	22.3	9.8	44
Lower class	18	33.3	0.0	
FEMALE, 18–44				
Upper class	79	19.0	13.9	73
Middle class	1,481	22.9	4.3	19
Lower class	9	11.1	22.2	200
FEMALE, 45 & over				
Upper class	31	19.4	12.9	67
Middle class	363	22.3	4.7	21
Lower class	8	25.0	0.0	
RACE AND ETHNICITY (1978–1993)				
MALE, 18–44				
White American	4,648	24.0	13.7	57
African American	723	28.5	7.5	26
MALE, 45 & over				
White American	2,408	22.0	11.4	52
African American	166	30.1	4.8	16
FEMALE, 18–44				
White American	2,752	27.5	4.5	16
African American	345	26.1	3.5	13
FEMALE, 45 & over				
White American	680	26.6	5.0	19
African American	92	31.5	3.3	10

old, rich men (39% of that group), and upper class major female characters (19%). Being older and upper class also increases the relative ratio of villainy among major characters. As Table 9 shows, older and richer types pay a higher price than the others for being good.

Violence, Victimization, and the Risks of Life

Violence was also defined in a clear-cut unambiguously observable manner: hurting or killing or the threat of hurting or killing in any context. Each character involved in any violence was recorded as a perpetrator, victim, or both.

Whatever else violence is or does, it demonstrates power. In dramatic representation, involving about one out of five speaking parts and over half of all major characters, it is the cheapest and quickest way of showing who can get away with what against whom. Content analyses of prime-time TV have shown that there are about 5 to 6 violent acts per hour and 20 to 25 violent actions per hour on Saturday morning children's programs (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1990).

In general, young males commit and suffer most of the violence, with perpetrators and victims in fairly even balance (see Table 10). Although aging for women and persons of color reduces the chances of involvement in violence, it increases its risks. For every 100 young male perpetrators of violence, there are 112 victims. The comparable relative victimization ratios are midlife and older males, and midlife and older females, 125:140; midlife and older African American females, and midlife and older and richer females, 160:200.

Major characters experience more violence and also are more often injured (see Table 11). Therefore, their relative victimization ratios are lower. Their "pecking order" of relative victimization (the number of victims for every 100 major characters committing violence): midlife and older males, and midlife and older females, 96:111; midlife and older African American females, and midlife and older upper class females, 167:175.

Lethal violence involves 5.5% of all and 10% of major characters (see Table 12). Aging again cuts the likelihood of killing and increases risk of being killed—but only for women. The relative ratios of characters killed for every 100 killers are for young men, 124; midlife and older men, 120; young women, 146; midlife and older women, 160.

Major characters kill more, but are relatively less likely to get killed, unless they are older women. Their relative ratios of characters killed for every 100 killers are young men, 52; midlife and older men, 43; young

Table 9

Heroes and Villains: Major Characters, 1973–1993

	n Total	% Heroes	Villains	% Villains per 100 heroes
MALE, 18–44	1,538	57.0	13.6	24
MALE, 45 & over	716	46.9	17.0	36
FEMALE, 18–44	882	58.4	7.1	12
FEMALE, 45 & over	203	47.3	7.4	16
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS				
MALE, 18–44				
Upper class	102	40.2	29.4	73
Middle class	1,390	58.3	12.4	21
Lower class	32	53.1	12.5	24
MALE, 45 & over				
Upper class	87	28.7	39.1	136
Middle class	607	49.6	14.2	29
Lower class	19	52.6	5.3	10
FEMALE, 18–44				
Upper class	83	33.7	19.3	57
Middle class	782	61.5	5.9	10
Lower class	12	16.7	8.3	50
FEMALE, 45 & over				
Upper class	32	28.1	18.8	67
Middle class	165	52.7	4.2	8
Lower class	2	0.0	0.0	
RACE AND ETHNICITY				
MALE, 18–44				
White American	1,275	57.2	13.7	24
African American	139	56.1	10.1	18
MALE, 45 & over				
White American	601	47.4	16.6	35
African American	48	50.0	2.1	4
FEMALE, 18–44				
White American	773	57.2	7.4	13
African American	56	62.5	5.4	9
FEMALE, 45 & over				
White American	164	48.2	6.1	13
African American	27	48.1	7.4	15

Table 10

Violent Perpetrators and Victims: All Characters, 1973–1993

	Total	% Involved	% Perpetrators	% Victims	Victims per 100 Violent Perpetrators
TOTAL (1973–1993)					
MALE, 18–44	8,868	34.5	24.8	27.7	112
MALE, 45 & over	4,139	23.2	14.6	18.3	125
FEMALE, 18–44	4,489	19.4	10.3	15.6	151
FEMALE, 45 & over	1,153	13.4	6.8	9.5	140
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS (1983–1993)					
MALE, 18–44					
Upper class	73	46.6	34.2	32.9	96
Middle class	2,566	32.3	22.4	25.3	113
Lower class	40	45.0	25.0	37.5	150
MALE, 45 & over					
Upper class	74	25.7	21.6	17.6	81
Middle class	1,164	19.1	12.1	13.7	113
Lower class	18	27.8	5.6	27.8	500
FEMALE, 18–44					
Upper class	79	25.3	17.7	17.7	100
Middle class	1,481	15.3	8.2	11.5	139
Lower class	9	22.2	11.1	22.2	200
FEMALE, 45 & over					
Upper class	31	16.1	6.5	12.9	200
Middle class	363	12.4	6.3	7.7	122
Lower class	8	12.5	12.5	12.5	100
RACE AND ETHNICITY (1978–1993)					
MALE, 18–44					
White American	4,648	33.6	24.2	27.0	112
African American	723	30.4	20.1	23.2	116
MALE, 45 & over					
White American	2,408	20.9	13.1	16.2	124
African American	166	16.9	12.7	12.0	95
FEMALE, 18–44					
White American	2,752	18.9	10.3	15.0	146
African American	345	13.0	7.2	9.3	128
FEMALE, 45 & over					
White American	680	11.0	5.4	6.9	127
African American	92	10.9	5.4	8.7	160

Table 11

Violent Perpetrators and Victims: Major Characters, 1973–1993

	N	Involved	Perps	Victims	Victims per 100 Violent Perpetrators
MALE 18–44	1,538	63.7	51.6	54.4	106
MALE, 45 & over	716	46.8	37.0	36.5	98
FEMALE, 18–44	882	44.6	30.8	35.3	114
FEMALE, 45 & over	203	30.5	18.7	20.7	111
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS					
MALE 18–44					
Upper class	102	53.9	46.1	45.1	98
Middle class	1,390	64.2	51.9	54.7	105
Lower class	32	68.8	53.1	68.8	129
MALE, 45 & over					
Upper class	87	50.6	44.8	40.2	90
Middle class	607	45.8	35.7	35.4	99
Lower class	19	57.9	36.8	52.6	143
FEMALE, 18–44					
Upper class	83	43.4	26.5	34.9	132
Middle class	782	44.8	31.1	35.4	114
Lower class	12	25.0	25.0	16.7	67
FEMALE, 45 & over					
Upper class	32	31.3	12.5	21.9	175
Middle class	165	28.5	18.2	18.2	100
Lower class	2	50.0	0.0	50.0	
RACE AND ETHNICITY					
MALE, 18–44					
White American	1,275	63.8	51.8	54.3	105
African American	139	100.0	43.2	46.8	108
MALE, 45 & over					
White American	601	45.3	35.6	35.3	99
African American	48	43.8	31.3	29.2	93
FEMALE, 18–44					
White American	773	44.4	30.7	35.2	115
African American	56	37.5	28.6	25.0	88
FEMALE, 45 & over					
White American	164	28.7	17.1	18.3	107
African American	27	25.9	11.1	18.5	167

women, 45; midlife and older women, 167. Killing by a major character with relative impunity is a male prerogative; they are often the enforcers of law and order. If and when older women get involved in violence, they are four times as likely to get killed as men of the same age.

As Table 12 indicates, at the bottom of the overall relative victimization "pecking order" are the relatively few older "upper class" female characters who get involved in violence, and the larger group of young black male characters, *all* of whom are involved in violence.

In general, then, women and characters of color pay the highest price for committing violence in the world of television drama. Young black males playing leading roles are more likely to be given roles in which violence may be justified, such as law enforcers, than are other young Black male characters. When rich women or young Black men in supporting roles commit violence, the retribution is fierce.

Personality Profile

Major characters in a special sample of prime-time programs whose casts included older characters were rated on several personality attribute scales. These scales include whether characters are treated with disrespect or pity, and whether they are portrayed as nuisances, stubborn, eccentric, or foolish.

More older characters are treated with disrespect than are characters in any other age group. About 70% of the older men and more than 80% of the older women are not held in high esteem or treated courteously, a very different pattern of treatment than that found for younger characters. Similarly, a much larger proportion of older characters than younger characters are portrayed as eccentric or foolish. A greater proportion of older women than older men—two thirds as compared with about one half—are presented as lacking common sense, acting silly, or being eccentric.

The script analysis that follows illustrates some features of the bird's-eye-view above, and contributes others that do not lend themselves to aggregate analysis.

The Script Analysis

A random sample of 50 scripts treating aging and older characters at some depth from 1980 through 1994 was examined to explore the plot

Table 12

Killers and Killed, Percent of All Characters, 1973–1993

	Total	Involved	Perps	Victims	Victims per 100 Killers
TOTAL (1973–1993)					
MALE, 18–44	8,868	7.7	3.9	4.8	124
MALE, 45 & over	4,139	5.9	2.9	3.5	120
FEMALE, 18–44	4,489	3.0	1.3	1.8	146
FEMALE, 45 & over	1,153	2.3	0.9	1.4	160
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS (1983–1993)					
MALE, 18–44					
Upper class	73	17.8	6.8	12.3	180
Middle class	2,566	7.7	4.4	4.1	94
Lower class	40	12.5	7.5	7.5	100
MALE, 45 & over					
Upper class	74	9.5	5.4	5.4	100
Middle class	1,164	5.0	2.1	3.1	150
Lower class	18	16.7	0.0	16.7	
FEMALE, 18–44					
Upper class	79	7.6	7.6	0.0	
Middle class	1,481	1.8	0.8	1.1	133
Lower class	9	0.0	0.0	0.0	
FEMALE, 45 & over					
Upper class	31	3.2	0.0	3.2	
Middle class	363	1.1	0.3	0.8	300
Lower class	8	0.0	0.0	0.0	
RACE AND ETHNICITY (1978–1993)					
MALE, 18–44					
White American	4,648	6.0	3.4	3.3	98
African American	723	6.2	2.2	4.1	188
MALE, 45 & over					
White American	2,408	4.9	2.3	2.8	122
African American	166	1.2	1.2	0.0	
FEMALE, 18–44					
White American	2,752	2.2	1.1	1.2	113
African American	345	1.7	0.9	0.9	100
FEMALE, 45 & over					
White American	680	0.9	0.6	0.3	50
African American	92	1.1	0.0	1.1	

formulas, characterizations, and dialogues used to convey certain troubling aspects of gender and age on television.

Abandonment and Betrayal

Abandonment, betrayal, and even abuse by family, friends, and supposedly well-intentioned members of the community form the background to the aggregate findings of isolation from family context, infirmity, and mental illness. Of major women elders in the scripts studied, 63% were betrayed or abandoned by their families or friends while 42.8% of the major older males found themselves in a similar predicament. These elders were involved in plotlines that emphasized either that they preferred to be isolated or that they stubbornly acted in ways that prompted well-meaning family and friends to abandon them.

An episode of "Thirtysomething" exemplified this plot formula when it portrayed a clash of three generations: 80-year-old Rose Pollack, Rose's daughter Elaine in her 50s, and Elaine's daughter Melissa in her 30s. Elaine is portrayed as a dutiful and concerned daughter plagued by her mother's stubbornness and resistance to common sense. Rose is a woman with arrhythmia and congestive heart failure, but she resists Elaine's attempt to take care of her, and finds an ally in granddaughter Melissa.

Rose's increasingly controlling and irrational behavior finally alerts Melissa to the fact Elaine is correct after all: Rose is just a power-hungry, sick old woman, "an old bat on a throne." Melissa and Elaine decide to remove themselves from Rose's life and intervene only if "something happens to her." The last words of the script are a camera direction that makes clear that Rose is now isolated from the family:

> *We move away from [Melissa] past a shelf on which all that remains are two framed photos. Rose alone, and Melissa and Elaine together.*

Older male characters similarly struggle to maintain control, confront limitations attributed to age, and find themselves subdued or abandoned by children. However, male characters usually see the light by the conclusion of the episode and, unlike Rose, manage to salvage the reverence of younger family members.

For example, an older male character is portrayed in the "Wonder Years" in a situation similar to Rose's. "Gramps Arnold" loses his license after numerous accidents, but objects to his son Jack "telling him

what to do" by keeping him out of the driver's seat. Like Rose, Gramps commandeers his grandchild Kevin as an ally, but unlike Rose, Gramps has enough logic to know when he is beaten and at the last moment earns Kevin's admiration by giving away his car. Gramps demands that Kevin drive away and leave him alone in the final scene.

When older parents spar with their adult children in the television world, it is best if the elders lose. If the older parents win as Rose did and succeed in pushing the children away, they will be abandoned. If the children win the battle and the elder complies with youthful authority, he or she gains respect. Yet ultimately, even the elder who submits to the authority of the younger generation ends up in isolation.

Older "winners" tend to be like the dying Mrs. Wilbourne from an episode of "A Year in the Life" who also refuses to take medication or obey other orders. Eventually she triumphs over her daughter Alice, refusing Alice's offer to move in with her and insisting that Alice leave her alone. "I said I never wanted to be a burden to my children. I raised you, don't own you," insists Mrs. Wilbourne. Alice drives off, leaving her mother to die alone.

Older "losers" who accept subordination by their children are usually men like Gramps. There is also Dominic Santini, an older fighter pilot in an episode of "Airwolf" who insists on undertaking a dangerous mission that he is no longer physically capable of executing. Dominic's former student, Hawke, fears for Dominic's safety and undertakes the mission himself. Dominic is not pleased with this betrayal and arguments and fistfights occur between the two of them. Eventually Dominic ends up in the back of the aircraft while Hawke successfully pilots them through the violent and dangerous mission. When the violence ends and the coast is clear, the shaken Dominic has come to his senses about his limitations, and Hawke is sympathetic.

Hawke: If you'd like to take the controls I could use the rest.
(Dominic reacts)
Dominic: I like it back here, just fine. *(Hawke smiles)*

Dominic accepts the fact his friend betrayed him "for his own good."

Burdens of Victimization

While benevolent younger people frequently subordinate older characters, predatory younger people also prowl the television landscape to rob or victimize (often) wealthy older women. For example, Margaret

Chase is a character whose victimization includes both overmedication and financial plunder. She befriends an evil younger man, Dutton, who renders her passive with medication and proceeds to steal her assets. Dutton succeeds until Margaret is rescued by a former lover. The rescue is tinged with tragedy; she soon dies of a terminal illness.

Violence is television's most obvious means of structuring power relationships. Violence against elders is usually depicted as a particularly evil kind of crime that is nonetheless a commonplace and largely unavoidable fact of life (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner & Signorielli, 1990). An example occurs in an episode of "Beauty and the Beast", set in an apartment building in New York City. The script specifies that the building's tenants are all elders, and in addition there are strong hints that they are Jewish, with numerous Yiddish phrases used and particular foods such as *latkes* mentioned.

The anonymous building owner hires a management company to persuade the tenants to move out of the building. The script directs that Leo Mundy, head of the management company, is "a man past his prime, going soft in all the wrong places." Mundy and his gang conduct a crime spree against the tenants in an effort to scare them into leaving. One tenant, Micha Langer, is nearly killed by a fire bomb. Later when he and his wife, Sophie, are returning from the store, they are mugged. Two older female tenants report being robbed. One older man, Herman, relents and agrees to relocate, "his face swollen and bruised; he's been badly beaten."

The tenants are depicted as too terrified to emerge from the building, night or day. The plot reinforces older characters' statements that their suffering is deplorable but normal for the modern metropolis. Despite repeated incidents of terror and building code violations, neither the police nor the district attorney investigates the elders' victimization, claiming they are too swamped with other more pressing cases.

One day when Mundy's bullies invade the building, the assistant district attorney, Cathy, reluctantly convinced by a friend to investigate the situation, happens to be visiting the Langers.

> *The residents cower as the rooms are searched . . . . It's a night of terror. The sounds of thugs kicking in doors above is clearly audible, jarring the people's memory of another time, another place . . . .*

The script exploits images of the Holocaust to find a scene worthy of the level of violence and terror they seek to depict against elders. In the end, Vincent, the beast, comes to the rescue, single-handedly conquers

the villains, and kills Leo Mundy. The viewer is left with the message that the level of criminal violence suffered by older people is akin to Nazi persecution of Jews, older people are incapable of defending themselves, and law enforcement couldn't care less.

Murdered Women

Among the major older characters in the scripts, three women and no men were victims of murder. Two of the women were the only two African American females.

The two African American women are depicted as kind and moral, savagely killed by fellow African Americans. One of the women is Bessie Copeland, a religious and disabled elder. After her nephew threatens her, she attempts to contact private detectives, but in the middle of the phone conversation the nephew strangles her to death. The other African American victim is Miss Kendrick, a music teacher who shows a special affinity for one particular African American student whom she nurtures through his childhood. That same teenager stands by and watches while his friends, other African American males, murder Kendrick.

The one White murder victim is Veronica Kirk, an aging movie star. Her daughter conspires to make her appear mentally ill, her colleague tries to rob her, and her best male friend murders her.

All three older women are major characters killed by the treachery of members of their family or close circle of confidants. By contrast, four men who are murdered are all minor characters whose murder results from business associations gone sour.

Mental Incapacity and Physical Decay

When private investigator Rick Simon arrives at the scene of Bessie Copeland's murder, the script directive explains what he finds there:

> *Bessie Copeland's wheelchair lies on its side at the foot of the stairs. A few uniformed cops are huddled in casual conversation, showing no particular interest or concern . . . .*

Rick's statement that he heard Bessie being murdered over the phone fails to generate any alarm: "Maybe she got attacked by a pink elephant," the chief detective jokes.

Older White women are also portrayed as useless, although they manage to garner more sympathy than poor Bessie. In an episode of "Designing Women," five women characters go for an Outward Bound-style wilderness learning experience. The younger women are

Charlene and Suzanne; the older women are Bernice, Evelyn, and Dorothy. Bernice is a character who appears in other "Designing Women" scripts as a slightly discombobulated elder whose friends are in nursing homes. With Evelyn and Dorothy temporarily away from the campsight, Bernice has some choice remarks to make about them:

Charlene: Evelyn and Dorothy are sweet, aren't they? They remind me of those sisters who used to be on the Waltons.

Bernice: Yes, Charlene, they are sweet. But they're also old. I hate it, but if they can't keep up with the group, we'll have to dump 'em.

Charlene: Bernice, that's so cruel. Anyway, we're supposed to help each other.

Bernice: I know. But I looked in the manual and you get more points for leadership than helpfulness. And any good leader knows one of the first things you do is streamline the organization. Eliminate the dead weight.

Charlene: Bernice, I've never seen you this way. You're so incisive and energetic!

Bernice: I know! It's this wilderness air. My fog has lifted. I'm completely invigorated.

Charlene: Well, that's great, but let's not get too carried away.

Suzanne: Don't discourage her, Charlene. At least she isn't saying something dumb. I think it's kinda nice to see Bernice on top of things.

According to formula, the writers used an older woman character to deliver this stark message, and Bernice is duly rewarded for it: At a ceremony on the final day of the leadership experience, Bernice is given an award for exhibiting the "highest standards of leadership."

Older women characters often note but do not address the fact that they are irrelevant in the television world. "My life ain't much but it's all I have," says Veronica Kirk, and the viewer cannot help but agree since she has not emerged from her house for the past 30 years. In an episode of "We Got It Made," Alice complains to her younger adult education classmates that "I don't have much charisma. When I'm on the subway, people sit on me."

With the exception of a few men portrayed as powerful, if aged, captains of industry, older characters are depicted as confused or muddled. Mental illness and growing intellectual incapacity are omnipresent symptoms of the aging process on television. Reference to mental conditions ranged from younger characters expressing worry about the growing confusion of parents to an elder announcing that her dog is actually her

deceased husband, to references to a confused elderly mailman who delivers the wrong letters, to the disturbed elder on a homicidal rampage.

Sickness is seen as an inevitable and constant state of affairs of the older character. Older characters have no social or political clout, with older women the most subordinated and older African American women only pathetic victims. In contrast to the political strength of seniors in the real world, elders in the television world submit voluntarily to discrimination or are ridiculed, degraded, dismissed, and brutalized.

Ridicule

The majority of older women in the scripts are ridiculed, while only 20 percent of the men endure such treatment. Elders are most often ridiculed for supposed age-related traits. For example, in an episode of "Thirtysomething", Melissa and her grandmother Rose, mentioned earlier as initially close but later separated by Rose's controlling behavior, are in Rose's dressing room,

Rose: *(looks in mirror)*
How's my makeup?
Melissa: You look okay, for an old bag.
Rose: *(Sits down)*
Thanks . . . where's my needlepoint?

This is meant to demonstrate equality and closeness between the two women, swapping a joke across generations. Yet, it is the older woman who must bear the burden of the joke. Rose's insecurity about her appearance is clear throughout the episode, yet she must tolerate biting ridicule in order to be granted an equal relationship.

Characters are often chided for supposed age-related mental infirmities. Middle-aged teacher Mrs. Russell is shown in an episode of "Head of the Class" with symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, and is eventually forced to resign. She later sends a postcard which one of the teachers, Charlie, reads to her class in the final scene. The script reads:

Charlie: "Just hit London. Having a wonderful time . . . as far as I can remember . . . . only kidding . . . . Hope all of you are well. Miss you very much. Love, Queen Elizabeth.

(Class laughs, we cry, stay tuned for "Hooperman")

Older women's sex life usually involves unsuccessfully clamoring for a husband. However, in "The Golden Girls," two female characters

are depicted as romantically involved (no other such midlife or older women turned up in the 20-year sample), prompting considerable witticisms that have an adolescent cruelty.

The dominant characterization of older women's sexuality, however, is the man-hungry, frustrated, wealthy widow. A group of them tour the White House and flirt with a younger man, which provokes great amusement. In an episode of "A Year in the Life," middle aged widower Joe inadvertently finds himself hosting a garden club meeting that consists entirely of widows. Joe's son jokes to his father, "You should see the way they look at you, like you're a hamburger and they haven't eaten in about a year."

Older women clamor for older men, but if older men do any clamoring, it is for younger women. Older men flirting with youthful women is depicted as "sweet." But a hint of sexual congress between an older woman and a younger man is seen as pathetic.

"The Golden Girls" Characters

Four older women and no man in the cast of "The Golden Girls" stands in sharp contrast with the demography of the television world. But, instead of departing from stereotypes in other respects as well, "The Golden Girls" follows the television formula for depicting older women, and in some cases exceeds it in bias and mean-spiritedness.

Like most of prime time's older women, all but one of "The Golden Girls" are widowed and roommates because they were isolated or abandoned by family and friends. Sophia's daughter Dorothy tried to put her in a nursing home, Dorothy's husband divorced her for a younger woman, and widows Rose and Blanche found themselves alone and financially at risk.

Within the "Golden Girls" universe, Sophia is the stereotypical old woman. She suffers a stroke, appears confused on occasion, is retired, and seems to have a limited lifestyle. She is insulted with age-related epithets and made to appear distracted and superficial. At her daughter's wedding, while the others are shown thinking about future happiness for Dorothy, she is depicted as obsessed with her aching hamstring.

The characters show no remorse in attacking the weakest and most vulnerable aspects of each other's psyche. They insult, demean, and ridicule each other with impunity, rarely exchanging words of affection or respect. Blanche is ridiculed with locker room jokes about her promiscuity. Sophia

suffers insults for presumed symptoms of her age and infirmities. "Boy, you play that stroke like a Stradivarius," snipes her daughter. Dorothy is teased for her asexuality and unattractiveness to men, and Rose for her stupidity and affinity for telling long, absurd stories of her past life.

Conclusion: The Lessons

When seen from a bird's-eye-view, the contours of otherwise familiar territory are striking for their consistency and stability. Age on television is a resource defined by dramatic formulas of gender and role. As characters age, their representation declines. Midlife and older women virtually vanish from the screen in major, positive, and powerful roles. They tend to be both underrepresented and overvictimized, isolated, infirm, often ridiculed, and if both rich and old also evil and marked for murder. A child growing up with American television will rarely if ever see a mature woman as leader.

What are the lessons viewers derive from television about gender, age and violence? Data from numerous large national surveys (Donnerstein, Slaby, & Eron, 1994; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1986) indicate that long-term regular exposure to television tends to make an independent contribution to the feeling of living in a mean and gloomy world (see Donnerstein & Smith's excellent review in this volume).

For example, heavy viewers are more likely than comparable groups of light viewers to overestimate one's chances of involvement in violence and express a greater sense of apprehension than do light viewers in the same groups. Viewers who see members of their own group as having a higher calculus of risk for violence than those of other groups develop a greater sense of mistrust, insecurity, and dependence—the marks of minority status (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1986).

Other survey findings show that heavy viewers are more likely than matched groups of light viewers to think that older people are not open-minded and adaptable, are not bright and alert, and are not good at getting things done. All of these relationships are stronger among younger respondents, those between the ages of 18 and 29.

We found similar patterns in studies of adolescents. When we asked about 600 sixth to ninth graders "At what age does a man become elderly or old?" and "At what age does a women become elderly or old?" light viewers gave the combined average age as 57 while heavy

viewers felt that people become old at 51. Most of these adolescents believe women become old before men do.

We did not find watching television to be associated with any positive images of older people. Heavy viewers believe that the elderly are in worse shape both physically and financially than they used to be, are not active sexually, are closed-minded, and are not good at getting things done. At the same time, television is telling young people that old age, especially for women, begins relatively early in life.

Even with the proliferation of channels on cable and satellite TV and the increasingly demographically targeted marketing strategies, the largest and most heterogeneous audiences share in common a vision of aging that is anything but productive. It cultivates conceptions that trap the elderly in limited and demeaning roles. The overall television image resists rather than assists efforts to increase the scope of gender equity and productive aging (Gerbner, 1994).

These patterns compose the cultural environment into which children are born and in which we all learn the roles of growing old as women and men. That historic transformation shifts much of the battle for productive aging to the cultural frontier.

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