

SUMMARY

Aging and Television: Portrayals in Prime-Time Drama and Conceptions of Social Reality

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In the last few decades, television has become the mainstream of the cultural environment that affects much of what most people think and do. Public perceptions of and responses to issues, policies, people, products, and institutions can no longer be fully understood without also assessing their most centralized and pervasive source -- the world of television.

This research* investigates television's role in shaping public conceptions of old age. It focuses on those crucial features which constitute the personal and social context in which old age is experienced in America. In short, it assesses what viewers of different ages learn from television's most vivid lessons -- its dramatic fare -- about aging and the aged.

"Aging and Television" is part of the ongoing Cultural Indicators (C.I.) research project, and like it, consists of two interrelated parts: (1) Message System Analysis -- monitoring the world of television and (2) Cultivation Analysis -- determining the conceptions of social reality that television tends to cultivate in different groups of viewers.

In the first part of the study, the C.I. Data Archives of Message System Analysis are used to isolate the image of the elderly as it appears in nine

* This study is being conducted under Administration on Aging Grant No. 90-A-1299, "Aging with Television," George Gerbner, Larry Gross, and Nancy Signorielli, Co-Principal Investigators.

years of prime-time network dramatic programming. Thus far, the analysis shows that the elderly bare barely visible, comprising only four percent of the major character population, while young and settled adults make up 91 percent of that same population.

One of the more interesting findings to date concerns the portrayal of elderly characters in violent situations. Among all major characters, the elderly are the least likely either to commit violence or to be victimized. But when victimized, the elderly are more likely than any other age group to be killed; that is, they are less likely to be just hurt.

Sex roles are also related to violence in an interesting way. As male characters age, their risk of general victimization declines. In fact, old men are the only age group more likely to commit violence than to be a victim of it. Young boys, on the other hands, are frequently hurt -- and old men do much of the hurting. This contest favors elderly men until it becomes lethal; then, the elderly males are more likely to be killed than to kill others.

A different scenario emerges for female characters. As they age, their risks of general victimization and lethal violence increase. Old women, unlike old men, are more likely to be hurt than to hurt others. Moreover, old women are never east as killers; they are only victims of lethal violence.

The second part of "Aging and Television" is a secondary analysis of several data bases -- the "Myth and Reality of Aging" survey*, 1975, 1977, and 1978 General Social Surveys**, and the C.I. Data Archives of Cultivation Analysis. These secondary analyses are designed to determine whether or not

* Conducted by Louis Harris and Associates for the National Council on Aging, 1974.

** Conducted for the National Data Program for the Social Sciences at the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

heavy viewers, who usually watch three or more hours of television each day, have different conceptions of social reality than people who watch less television. The analysis also controls for the age of respondents. In addition to being characterized as heavy or light viewers, respondents are also divided into three age groups: the elderly, 55 or older; middle aged, 31 to 54 years old; and the young, 18 to 20 years old.

To identify television's impact on viewers' conceptions, the analysis matches features of the television world with respondents' answers to questions about similar features of reality. For example, C.I. Message System Analysis shows that in the world of television, almost three out of ten elderly characters are likely to be victimized. In the real world, however, less than one out of a hundred elderly citizens is likely to be the victim of criminal violence, robbery, or assault.* Secondary analysis of the data bases determines whether respondents' answers to questions about personal safety are more characteristic of the television world or of reality.

Thus far, the analyses reveal that heavy viewers' responses to many of the questions reflect the world of television more than do the responses of light viewers in the same demographic groups. For instance, television seems to cultivate an exaggerated sense of danger and mistrust in heavy viewers compared to similar groups of light viewers. Specifically, heavy viewers -- especially the middle aged and elderly -- believe that the danger of being robbed or attacked on the street is a serious problem for most people over 65 years of age. In fact, in 1974 less than two in one thousand elderly were actually robbed or attacked.** Also, heavy viewers of all ages said that

* Report of the Special Committee on Aging, United States Senate, April 28, 1978, p. 193.

** Criminal Victimization in the United States, U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1974, p. 20.

fear of crime was a serious problem for them personally. Again, reality does not warrant these fears; only 3.3 percent of all people over 12 are actually victims of violent crime.*

A number of other areas are also being investigated, including additional questions about crime and violence, and questions focusing upon mistrust, alienation, pessimism, health, and sex-roles. Finally, the study also examines whether respondents' conceptions of the way the elderly are portrayed in television programs are consistent with the way the elderly are actually portrayed in a nine-year sample of these programs.

* Ibid, p. 18.