

THE IMAGE OF THE ELDERLY IN  
PRIME-TIME NETWORK TELEVISION DRAMA<sup>1</sup>

Nancy Signorielli and George Gerbner

The Annenberg School of Communications  
University of Pennsylvania

Homo Sapiens becomes a particular kind of human being through his use of symbols. Social regularities in human behavior cannot be understood in isolation from cultural regularities in the symbolic environment. And when the symbolic environment itself is changing, the quality of social health and behavior can best be assessed if we know which way the cultural tides flow.

The basic assumption underlying the research we call Cultural Indicators is that television drama is in the mainstream -- or is the mainstream -- of the symbolic environment which cultivates the most widely shared conceptions of life, society, and the world. No member of society is unaffected by its dominant cultural trends. Television drama offers viewers a continuous stream of "facts" and impressions about the ways of the world, the constancies and vagaries of "human nature", and the consequences of actions.

This analysis is based upon a unique data bank and research design called Cultural Indicators.<sup>2</sup> This framework consists of two interrelated procedures --

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<sup>1</sup> This report is based upon research being conducted under Administration on Aging Grant No. 90-A-1299, "Aging with Television".

<sup>2</sup> Cultural Indicators research began with the investigation of violence in network television drama in 1967-68 for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. It continued under the sponsorship of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee in Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the American Medical Association. A description of this research may be found in George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Marilyn Jackson-Beeck, Suzanne Jeffries-Fox and Nancy Signorielli, "Cultural Indicators: Violence Profile No. 9," Journal of Communication, 1978, 28:3, pp. 176-207.

(1) Message System Analysis - the periodic analysis of prime-time and weekend-daytime network dramatic television programming and (2) Cultivation Analysis - determining conceptions of social reality television viewing tends to cultivate in groups of child and adult viewers.

This discussion of how the elderly are portrayed in prime-time network television drama is based upon the analysis of a number of content items from the Cultural Indicators Message System Analysis 1969-1976 Data Archive for Major Characters.

This analysis isolates elderly characters through a content item entitled Social Age. This item consists of four age-related classifications -- (1) children and adolescents, (2) young adults, (3) settled adults (characters who have steady employment, a family, etc.), and (4) elderly. It also has a "cannot classify" category to cover those characters where social age cannot be determined. This discussion focuses upon the comparison of the three adult age categories; that is, it looks at how the elderly are portrayed in relation to young adults and settled adults. It uses archived data for four types of content items -- demographic, descriptive, home and family, and bi-polar personality trait scales.

#### The Social Age of Major Characters in Prime-Time Drama

The elderly are a very small segment (3.8 percent) of the major character population. Children and adolescents are also a small group (5 percent); while most characters are young adults (23 percent) or settled adults (67.9 percent). The distribution of all male and all female characters in the four Social Age categories is somewhat similar. However, a greater percentage of women are classified as young adults (30 percent of the women and 20 percent of the men are young adults) while more men than women are categorized as settled adults

(71 percent of the men as compared to 60 percent of the women). About the same percentage of men and women are classified as elderly.

The distribution of men and women within each group is also interesting. Overall, if we consider the entire population of major characters in prime-time network dramatic programming, the distribution of men to women is 75 percent to 25 percent. That is, men make up about 75 percent of the entire character population and women make up about 25 percent. This distribution also holds for characters classified as elderly and as settled adults. However, the distribution of men and women classified as young adults is somewhat more favorable to women -- that is, one-third of these characters are women and two-thirds are men.

#### General Demographic and Descriptive Information

Most television characters are white; overall, only 10 percent of the character population is classified as non-white. However, more of the elderly are likely to be non-white (17 percent) than settled adults (8 percent); non-whites make up 13 percent of the young adult group. Over 85 percent of television characters are categorized as middle class. However, class status tends to increase with age. The elderly have the greatest proportion of their group (18.6 percent) categorized as belonging to the upper class.

Overall, more than half of the major character population in prime-time programs are classified as "good". However, fewer of the elderly are portrayed as "good". Close to 60 percent of young adults and settled adults are classified as "good"; while less than 50 percent of the elderly are so categorized. Moreover, the percent classified as "bad" is the same for elderly and settled adult characters -- 14 percent. More than one-third of the elderly are portrayed as both "good" and "bad". In regard to success, fewer of the elderly, especially elderly women, are coded as successful. Propor-

tionately more elderly women are classified as "unsuccessful" than any other age-related group (almost 30 percent). About 19 percent of men in both the elderly and settled adult groups are classified as "unsuccessful". Finally, the elderly, more than any other adult age group, portray roles that are somewhat comic, and vice-versa, fewer of the elderly portray serious roles.

### Portrayal of Violence

Among all characters, the elderly are the least likely group to either commit violence or be victimized. If they are victimized, the elderly are more likely (than any other age group) to be killed, however, they are less likely to be just hurt.

Sex and age roles and violence are related in an interesting way. With increasing age, the male's risk of general victimization declines. Old men are the only age-related group who are more likely to commit violence than be victimized. Young boys get hurt a lot and old men do a lot of hurting. This contest favors elderly men until it becomes lethal -- then, the elderly males become one of the groups more likely to be killed than to kill others.

For women, increasing age means increasing risks of both being hurt and being killed. Old women, unlike old men, are more likely to get hurt than hurt others. When old women are cast in roles that involve killing, the role calls for them to get killed but never to kill.

### Home and Family Life

Content items focusing upon home and family life are a recent addition to the message system analysis. Consequently, this discussion is based upon the analysis of a small number of characters.-- all of these items, except marital status, were coded for four of the ten samples included in the

analysis. Given this note of caution, it appears that home and family may be an important aspect in the portrayal of the elderly in television drama. More of the elderly than any of the other adult age groups are married (about 67 percent), have children, and are coded positively on the family life item, that is, family life is important to them. However, none of the elderly women and only two of the elderly men in this sample are involved in a romantic relationship.

### Personality Traits

The analysis of the personality trait profiles of each age group revealed that elderly characters are rated less positively than young adults or settled adults. They are the only group not rated as attractive; but they are rated as being sociable, warm, peaceful, fair, and supportive. The elderly are also rated as the least happy (actually somewhat unhappy) of these groups of characters.

### Summary

In conclusion, the overall image of the elderly in this sample of prime-time, network dramatic television programs is that the elderly may be home and family loving people but yet they are generally ineffective and somewhat passive. The elderly are almost invisible in television drama; that is, very few characters are classified as old. Although the elderly are healthy (so are all other television characters), they do not portray roles that are very effective or active. Also, they portray comic, or somewhat comic, roles more often than they portray serious roles. Fewer of the elderly characters are portrayed as "good", and, in general, a greater percentage of the elderly, than any other age group, portray roles that are classified as "bad" or

"unsuccessful". Moreover, the elderly are not portrayed as a particularly powerful group because they are much more likely to be victimized than to inflict violence. Finally, their scores on personality trait scales reveal that they are a general ineffective group of characters.

Sex and Social Age of Major Characters  
in Prime-Time Drama  
(1969-1976)

	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
ALL CHARACTERS	1898	100.0
Male	1372	72.3
Female	526	27.7
CHILDREN/ADOLESCENTS	103	100.0
Male	68	66.0
Female	35	34.0
YOUNG ADULTS	436	100.0
Male	280	64.2
Female	156	35.8
SETTLED ADULTS	1289	100.0
Male	972	75.4
Female	317	24.6
ELDERLY	70	100.0
Male	52	74.3
Female	18	25.7

Social Age and Sex for  
 All Major Characters  
 (1969-1976)

	<u>ALL</u>		<u>MALE</u>		<u>FEMALE</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
<u>MAJOR CHARACTERS</u>						
TOTAL	1898	100.0	1372	100.0	526	100.0
Child-Adolescent	103	5.4	68	5.0	35	6.7
Young Adult	436	23.0	280	20.4	156	29.5
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