AGING AS A SOCIAL ROLE: THE LESSONS OF TELEVISION

By George Gerbner

"Biology is destiny" but the course it takes is culturally shaped. Women and men, tall and short, skinny and fat, dark and light, gay and straight, disabled and able, young and old are not only physiological differences but also social distinctions that can confine and shame and hurt.

Age is one of these traps. Stereotyped age roles of the life cycle are learned early and confirmed throughout life. Mass media are the most ubiquitous wholesalers of age roles in industrial societies.

Mass media, and particularly television, form the common mainstream of contemporary cultures. They present a steady, repetitive, and compelling system of images and messages. For the first time in human history, most of the stories are told most of the children not by their parents, their school, or their church but by group of distant corporations that have something to sell.

That unprecedented condition has a profound effect on the way we are socialized into our roles, including age as a social role. We learn to be children, pre-teens,

adolescents, adults and parents, and old persons, and to differentiate and often even segregate those roles, from the messages and images around us. The world of aging (and nearly everything else) is constructed to the specifications of marketing strategies.

What is the contribution of television to the process of age-role socialization? We have studied age-role portrayals in television drama and commercials and their associations with conceptions of aging.* The samples of programs and commercials were drawn from prime-time and weekend daytime (children's) network television in the late 1970s and the 1980s. All speaking parts were analyzed; major characters (those who portray leading roles) were given special attention. The analysis included a total of 25,608 characters in dramatic programs (16,688 major characters) and 8,301 characters in commercials.

Sex, race, class, age, type of role (major or minor), and type of program were coded for all characters. Age was coded in terms of both chronological age and social age. Social age is a functional category scheme that was used to characterize life cycle as well as a type of dramatic role.

* The studies on which this chapter is based have been conducted in collaboration with Larry Gross, University of Pennsylvania; Michael Morgan, University of Massachusetts; and Nancy Signorielli, University of Delaware. For more information about methodology and other details, see publications listed in the Bibliography.

The categories are child and adolescents, young adults (typically the age between adolescence and a more settled vocational and personal life and responsibilities), settled adults, and older adults. For major roles we also coded various aspects of characterization including personality traits, success (whether or not the character achieves what he/she sets out to do or otherwise exhibits characteristics indicative of success), the type of role (comic, serious, or mixed) in which a characters is cast, and a variety of other aspects of characterization. A reliability test was designed to insure that the observations did not reflect instruction ambiguity or observer bias.

Our analysis shows that age is a strong determinant of who appears most and gains or loses most on television. In contrast to the distribution of age groups in the American population, the television curve demonstrates a pronounced central tendency: it bulges in the middle years and under-represents both young and old people. Figure 1 shows the percentage age distribution in the actual population and in

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

the "worlds" of prime time television dramas and commercials. More than half of all television characters in both samples are between 25 and 45 years of age. Those 65 or over, comprising almost 12 percent of the U.S.

population, make up less than 3 percent of the fictional population. Commercials tend to further exaggerate these inequities.

The skewed pattern of age distribution reflects not real life but power, particularly purchasing power. The age profile of television characters resembles the distribution of consumer income by age. (Women may do most of the buying but men earn most of the money and marketing strategies, on the whole, seem to reflect a sexist orientation.) Television's prime-time population may well be seen as a mirror of the audience referred to in the industry as the "prime demographic market."

Figure 2 compares the percentage distribution of characters in weekend daytime dramas and commercials with

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

the U.S. population distribution. Here we note the exaggerated overrepresentation of children and the virtual absence of older characters in children's programs and commercials. In children's programs, 65 and older characters represent 1.4 percent of the fictional population. Characters in their twenties and early thirties, prominent in prime time, are reduced by half in children's programs and even more in the commercials. The

age group of the parents of young children has a low profile, as does the age group of their grandparents. A significant portion of the larger group in their 40s provides most of the villains.

In the world of prime time television drama--as in most mass media--men outnumbered women about three to one. That fact has profound consequences for all that happens in that world, from patterns of aging and employment to sex and violence. Given such a cast, the stories than can be best told are stories of power and conflict, stories in which older characters (especially women) are most likely to end up as victims.

Gender differences can be seen on Figures 3 and 4. Figure 3 shows the percentage age distribution of male and female characters in prime time dramatic programs and

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

commercials. A larger percentage of women than men appear in dramatic programs in their early twenties (in commercials in early thirties) when women's function as romantic partners and young housewives is supposed to peak, but then their numbers fall to 4 or 5 times below the number of men. As their usefulness in the world of television drama declines, their numbers shrink and their roles constrict.

While women are most concentrated, with almost a third of their total numbers, in the 25 to 34 age bracket, men are most concentrated, also with almost one-third of their numbers, in the 35 to 44 age bracket. The character population is structured to provide a relative abundance of younger women for older men, but no such abundance of younger men for older women. In other words, women age faster than men but both are barely visible in old age in the world of television. Television perpetuates an inequitable --if conventional-- gender-age role pattern.

Figure 4 shows the gender pattern in weekend daytime children's programs (mostly cartoons). Over half of all

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

females are under 21, but only 28 percent of all males are under 21. The most visible male age group is that between 35 and 45. Fully one-third of all men in weekend daytime programs fall into that group. The pattern of aging reflected in prime time is also evident in weekend daytime programs. Women over 65, over 12 percent of the real female population, are 4 percent of the women in the world of children's television; older men account for only 3 percent of all male characters.

Weekend daytime commercials show a larger percentage of boys (71 percent of male characters) as well as girls (85 percent of females) under 19. But older characters hardly exist; less than 1 percent of both genders are 65 and over.

Representation is, of course, not just a question of numbers or of fidelity to census figures. It is a question of the variety or roles, opportunities, life chances and images most people see in common from infancy on and as they grow old. Those underrepresented in the world of television are necessarily more stereotyped and limited. Visibility is privilege in the symbolic world. Symbolic annihilation is the price paid for aging in our (and our children's) entertainment.

Figure 5 compares the percentage age distributions of white and non-white men and women in prime time drama. It

FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

shows that while white men dominate the age of dramatic authority between 35 and 45, both non-white men and all women tend to be younger. Minority males occupy an age-related power position between white males and all females. The pattern in commercials is a somewhat exaggerated version of the prime-time pattern. There are no characters 65 or over in weekend children's programs or commercials who are

not white. Age as a resource cuts two ways for race as well as for gender. Those for whom the world of television has more use--more jobs, adventures, sex, power, and other opportunities--are created and cast in greater numbers and more potent positions than those whose dramatic values are more restricted.

We have seen that women on television "age faster" than men. That means that mature female characters are more likely to be cast for older roles than male characters of the same chronological age. Our "social age" classification of dramatic characters found that among characters from 55 to 64, only 22 percent of the men but 33 percent of the women are cast as old characters with no professional or romantic possibilities and rarely in a family setting. Among characters 65 and over, 72 percent of the men but 90 percent of women are cast as old characters.

Figures 6 and 7 show personality profiles of male and female dramatic characters by social age on bypolar adjective scales. The mean ratings of older men are less attractive, fair, rational, and happy than of other age groups. The mean rating of women are also less potent, smart, and efficient. Older women are significantly more repulsive than women of other age groups, and even somewhat more repulsive than men (witches come from this group), but

also more peaceful, which, as we shall see, means that in a conflict they are more likely to be victimized.

Age-related chances for success are also unequally distributed in the world of television. The percent of successful men increases with age, but as women age, their chances for success drops. Overall, more older women are unsuccessful than are successful. No other age group of characters suffers such fate.

Casting a character in a comic, serious or mixed role is also related to age. Older characters are much more likely than younger to be cast in a comic role. Programs with older characters (especially women) are most likely to be comedies. But when older women are cast in conflict situations, they are more likely to be the victims than men of the same age, and both are more likely to be victimized than younger men. The gender-age victimization ratio works this way:

For every 10 violent characters in television drama, there are 12 victims. For every 10 old male characters who are given violent roles, there are 14 old male victims. For every 10 old female characters who are violent, there are 18 old women victims.

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 percent of the older men and more than 80 percent 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 to about a half--are presented as lacking common sense, acting silly, or being eccentric.

What are the lessons viewers derive from television about growing old in our society? To investigate the conceptions of age among television viewers, we used data from the National Council on Aging "Myth and Reality of Aging" survey conducted by Louis Harris and Associates in 1974. We constructed an index of the conception of older people from responses to statements asserting that the number, the health, and the longevity of older people are

declining A high score on this index would reflect a generalized belief that old people represent a diminishing rather than growing segment of American society.

There is a significant positive relationship between amount of television viewing and scores on this index. The more people watch television, the more they tend to perceive old people in generally negative and unfavorable terms. Heavy viewers believe significantly more than light viewers that old people are a vanishing breed. The correlation is not reduced by controls for education, income, sex, or age, and it is much stronger for younger people. Thus, even with important demographic variables held constant, heavy viewers are more likely than light viewers to believe that old people are disappearing. Furthermore, those who watch more television believe that people (especially women) become old earlier in life.

Other and later survey findings also 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. Of course, there are notable exception of individual episodes and even series such as the popular The Golden Girls (which, however, also conforms to the pattern of comedic format, age-sex humor, and the absence of normal family setting.) But most viewers watch by the clock, not by the program, and heavy viewers watch more of everything. They cannot escape the overall portrayal of aging in the world ot television, the composite of which is revealed in our studies. Consequently, heavy viewers believe that the elderly are unhealthy, in worse shape financially, not active sexually, closed-minded, not good at getting things done, and so on. At the same time, television seems to be telling younger people that old age, especially for women, begins relatively early in life.

The social function of a medium that serves as the chief cultural arm of industrial society is to mediate enlightened visions of aging, and of life in general, to the

broadest and most diverse publics. However, the conflict between that function and efficient marketing tends to make productive aging and communication across age groups more difficult.

These patterns are the creation of a system of broadcasting and of story-telling with deep historical and commercial roots. They compose the cultural environment into which children are born and in which we all grow and learn aging as a social role. Despite much progress on many fronts, these patterns have been very stable over the quarter-century that we have been able to track them. The prospects for significant change are limited. We need a new environmental movement, a cultural environmental movement, to place the issue of television policy on the national agenda. Consciousness of the dynamics of learning aging in a mass culture is necessary for liberation from its constraints. Old people and their organizations have good reasons to be in the forefront of that movement.

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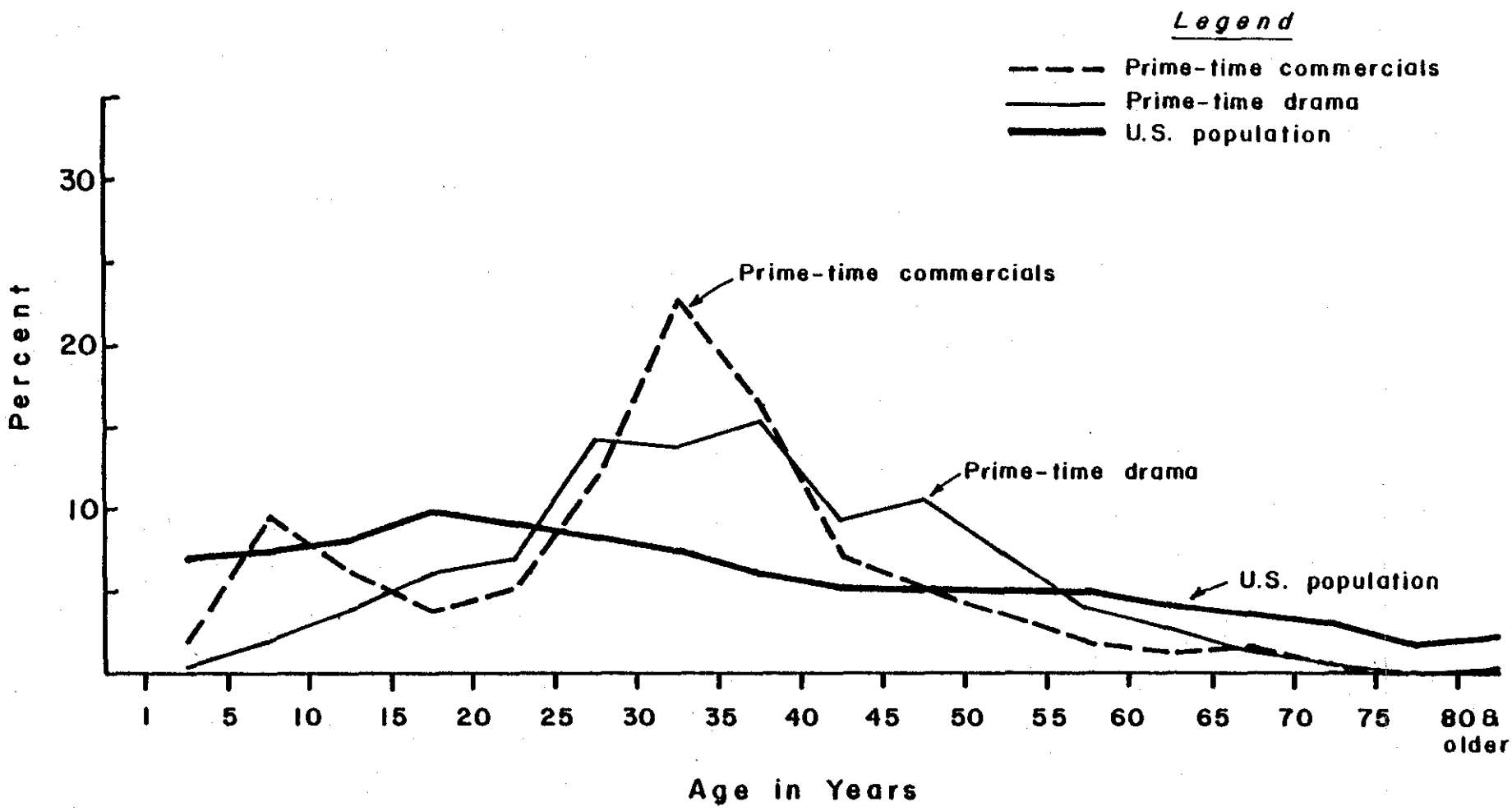

FIGURE I: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF U.S. POPULATION, AND CHARACTERS IN COMMERCIALS AND DRAMATIC PROGRAMS IN PRIME-TIME

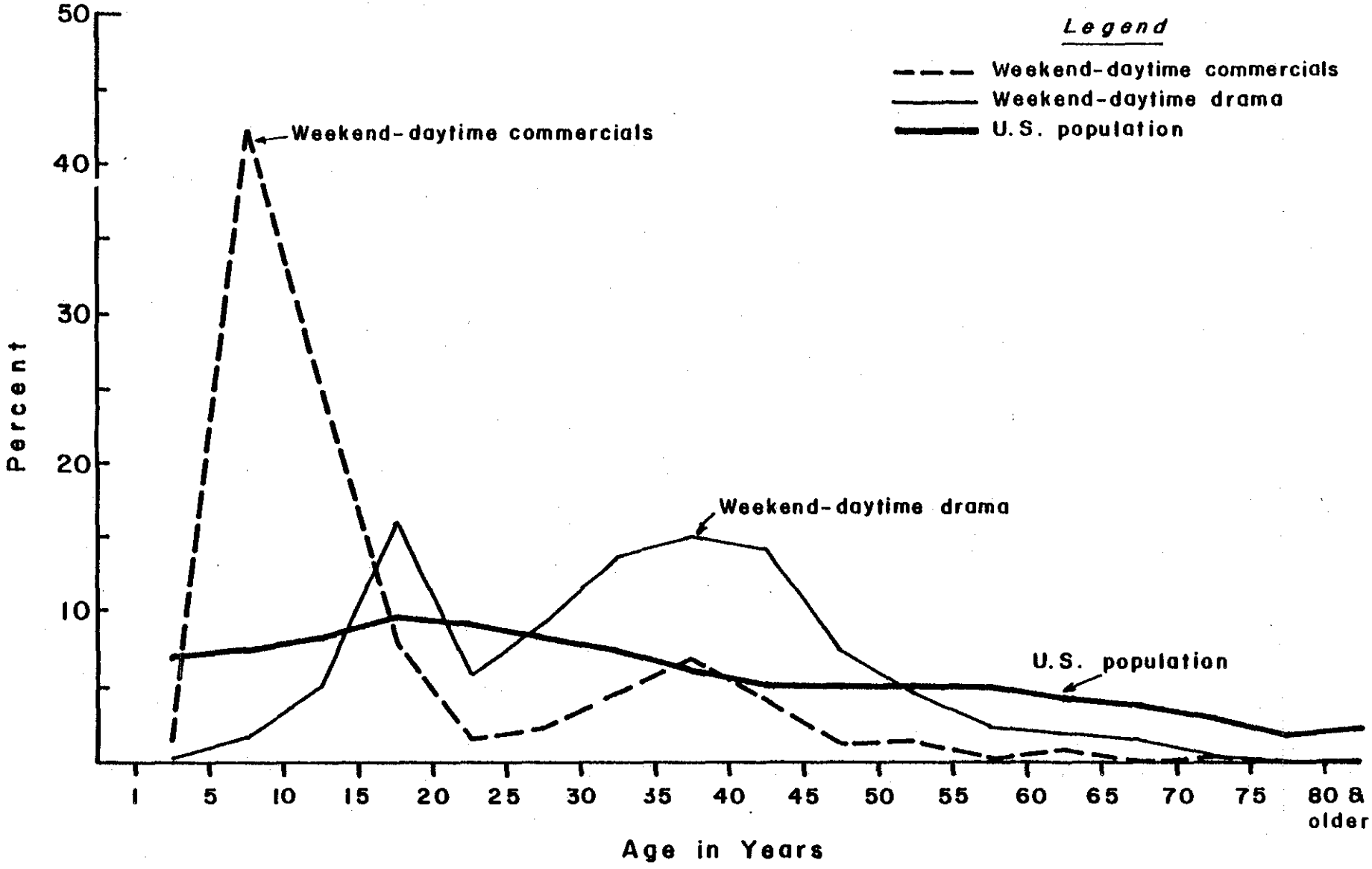

FIGURE 2: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF U.S. POPULATION, AND CHARACTERS IN COMMERCIALS AND DRAMATIC PROGRAMS IN WEEKEND-DAYTIME

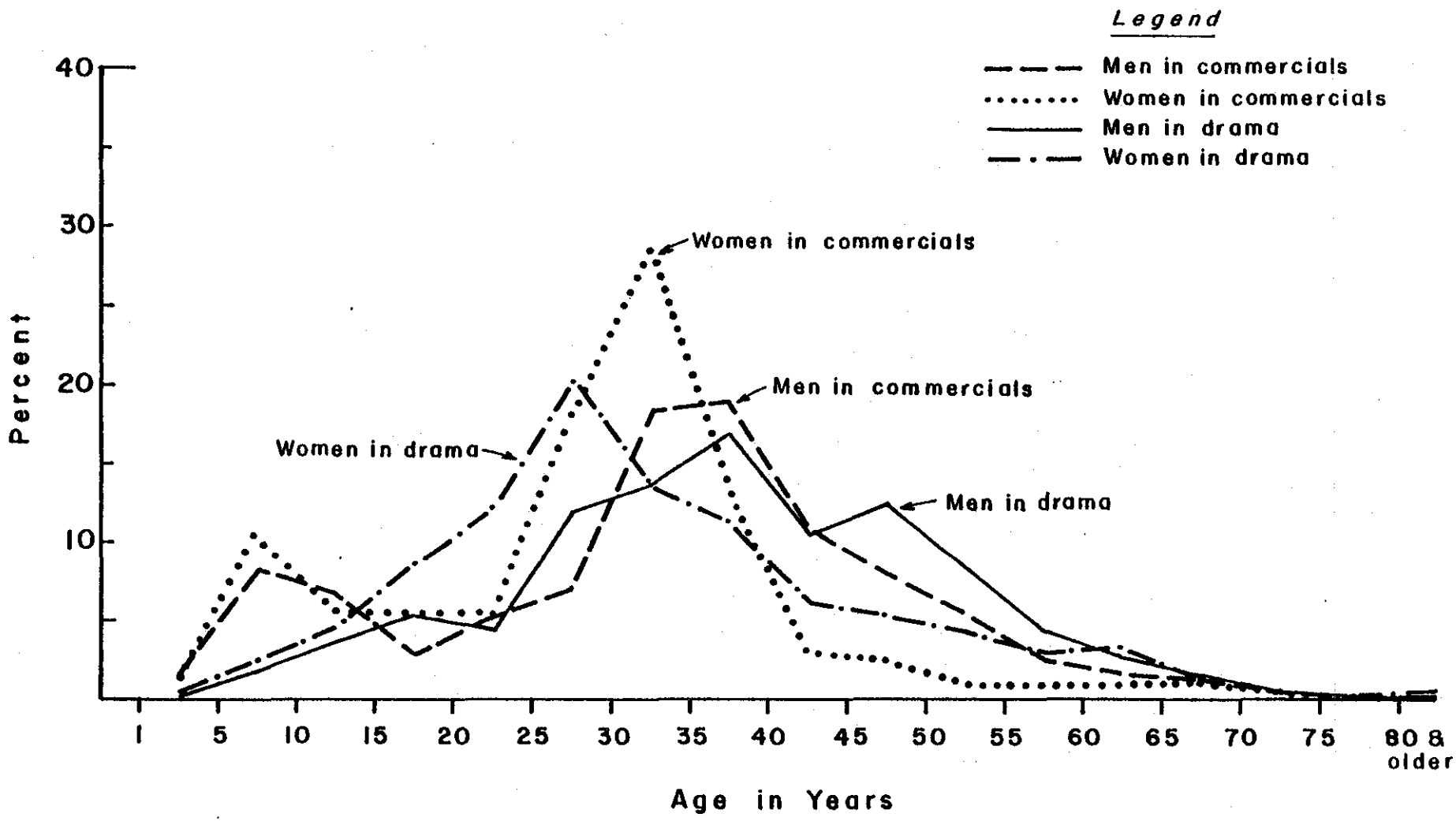

FIGURE 3: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS IN COMMERCIALS AND DRAMATIC PROGRAMS IN PRIME-TIME

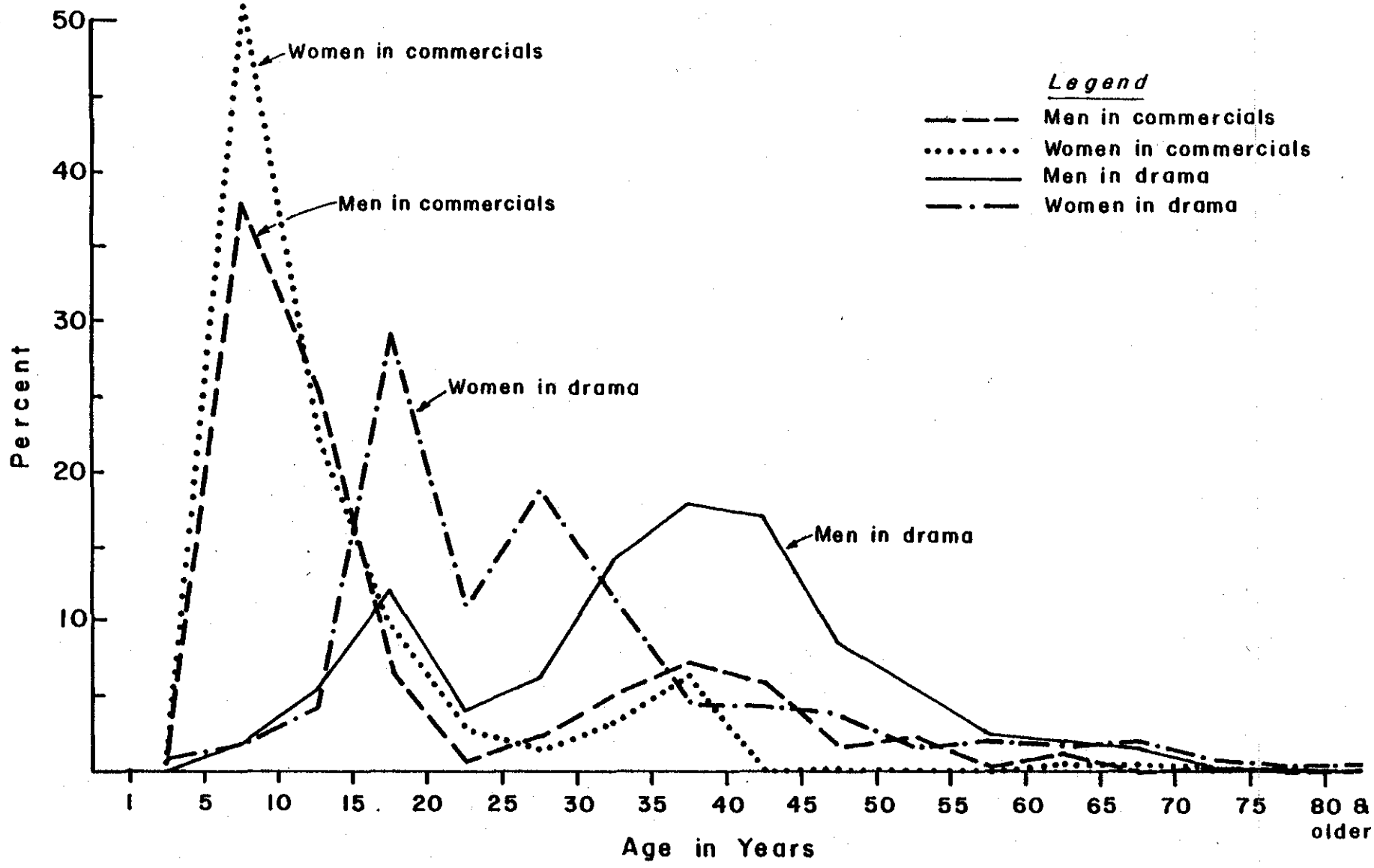

FIGURE 4: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS IN COMMERCIALS AND DRAMATIC PROGRAMS IN WEEKEND-DAYTIME

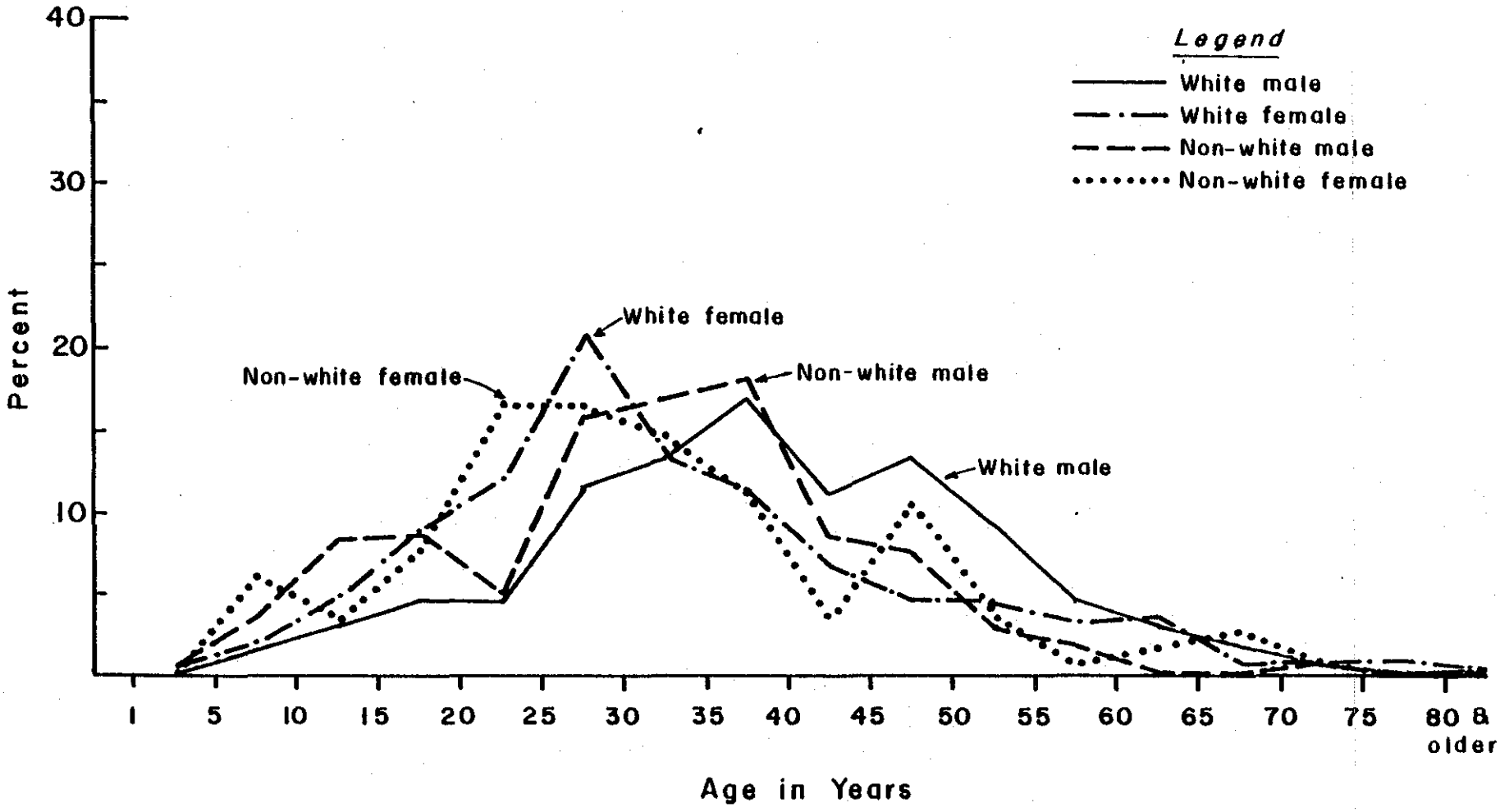

FIGURE 5: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF WHITE AND NON-WHITE MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS IN PRIME-TIME DRAMA

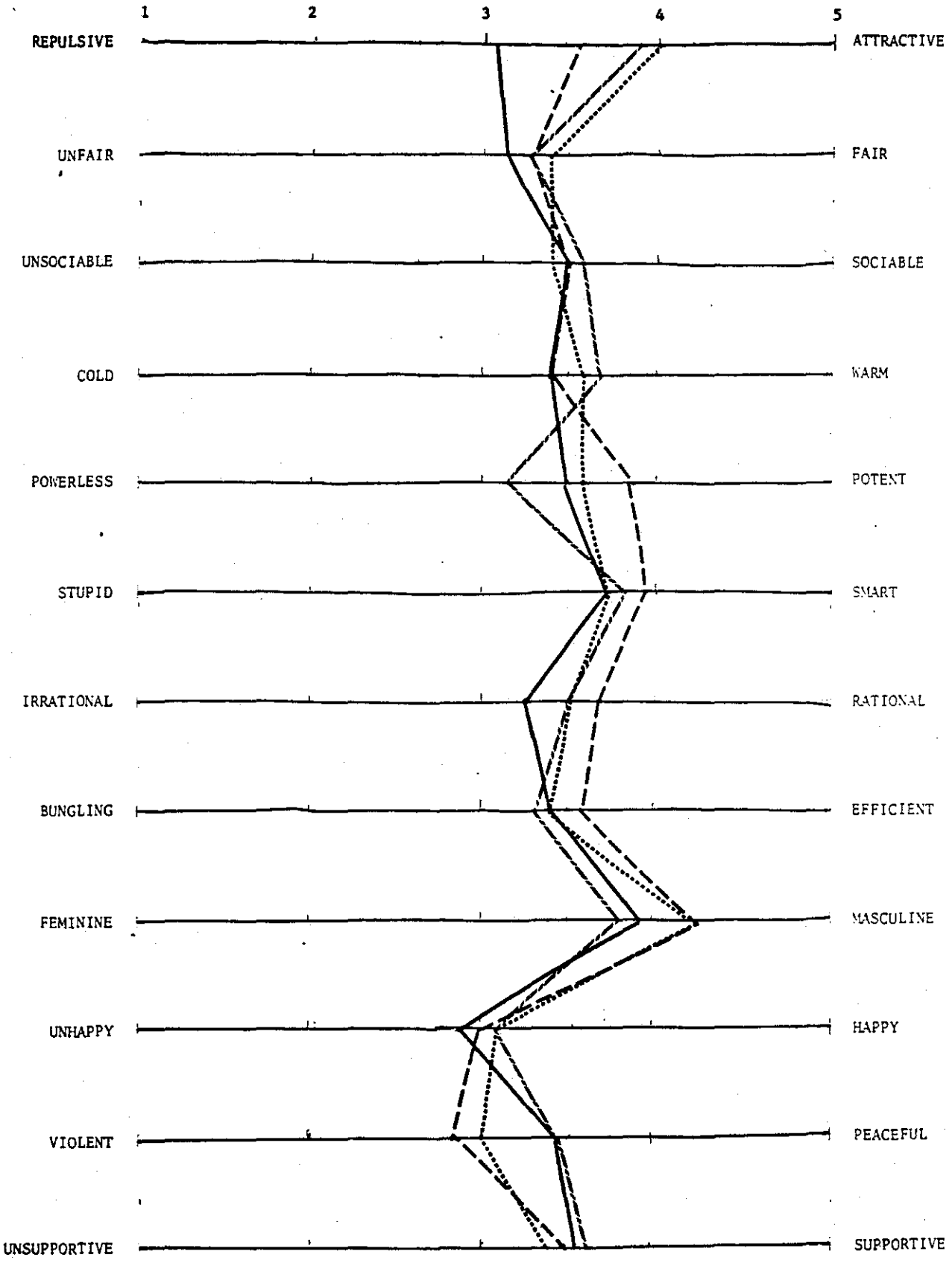

FIGURE 6 PERSONALITY TRAITS OF MALE CHARACTERS BY SOCIAL AGE

LEGEND: children/adolescents
young adults
settled adults
elderly

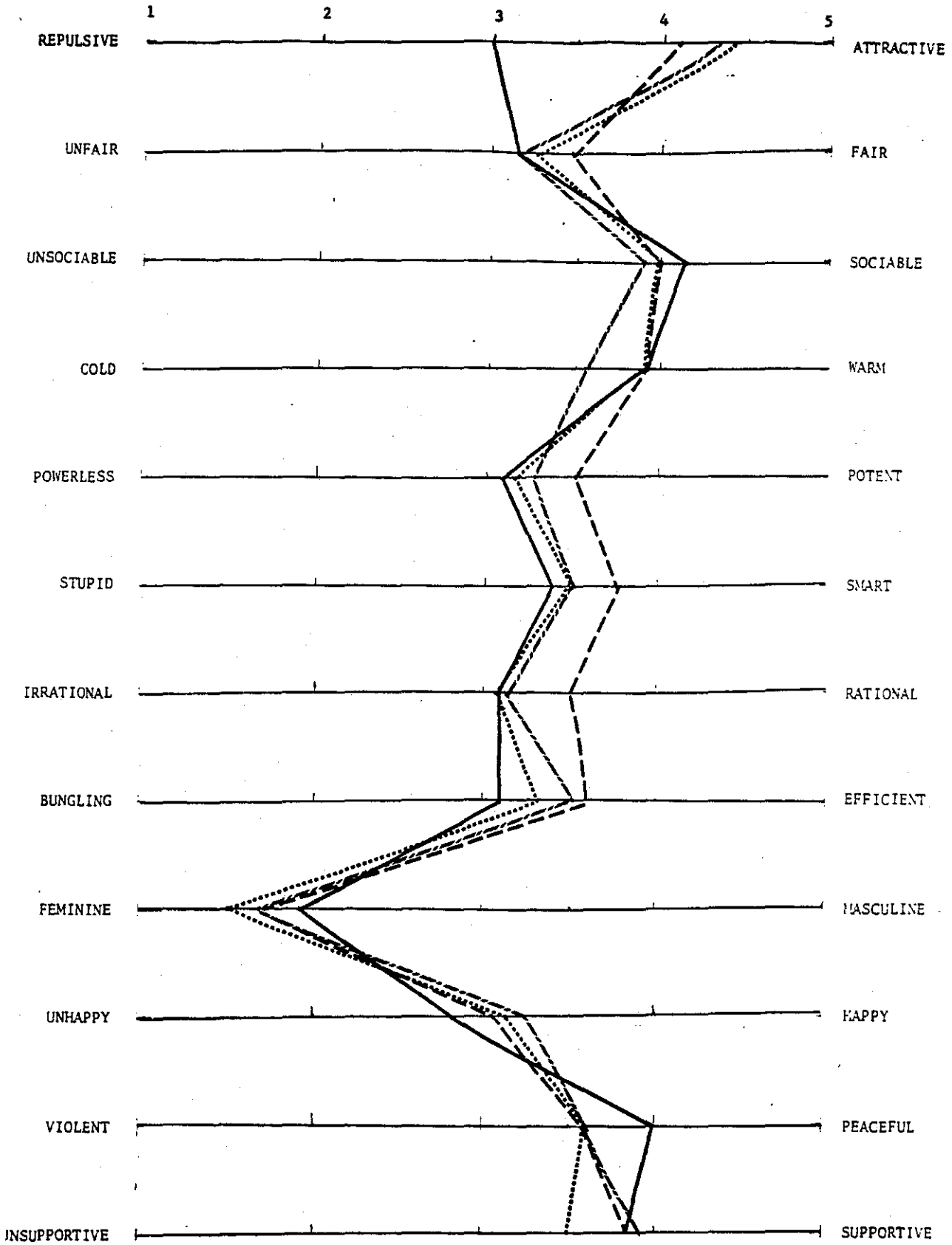

FIGURE 7 PERSONALITY TRAITS OF FEMALE CHARACTERS BY SOCIAL AGE

LEGEND: children/adolescents
young adults
settled adults
elderly