

TV Professions

MICHAEL MORGAN AND
GEORGE GERBNER

ASKING CHILDREN, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" is something of an historical novelty. The very notion of occupational choice was largely nonexistent in traditional societies. For males, it was "like father, like son"; for females, home and children. But the technological, social, and economic transformation of the post-Industrial Revolution has made going into the family business the exception.

Asking adolescents the same question is an equally recent phenomenon. Formerly, they already were grown up and either apprenticing or well into doing whatever it was they would continue to do. Today adolescents do not have it so easy. The responses of their younger years (like "fireman") will not suffice, and our relatively mobile system does not insert young people into predetermined, specific occupational slots. Aspirational fantasies of childhood must slowly give way and be replaced by more realistic expectations of the roles they will take as adults—in a future that may seem quite distant but is coming closer.

* Michael J. Morgan, Ph.D., is a research specialist of the Cultural Indicators Project for the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania.

* George Gerbner, Ph.D., is professor of communications and dean of the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania.

Much of the research presented here was conducted by the Cultural Indicators Project at the Annenberg School of Communications. George Gerbner and Larry Gross were co-principal investigators, Nancy Signorielli the research coordinator, and Michael Morgan the research specialist.

To make things even tougher, we also tell young people that they can be anything they want to be. It is up to them. Given ambition, initiative, and dedication, the possibilities are endless. But we do not really tell them what the choices are, much less the mechanisms of preparing for and entering a job.

Somehow young people acquire bits and pieces of information about various jobs, sometimes through direct contact, sometimes through the guidance of parents or other adult advisers, and sometimes through mass media—particularly TV. Of the tens of thousands of different types of jobs in this country, young people are exposed to only a small handful through any given source.

Suzanne Jeffries-Fox interviewed adolescents about their sources of information for six jobs: police, lawyers, judges, doctors, paramedics, and psychiatrists.¹ She found that TV was by far the most frequently cited source of information about these jobs, and the students discounted the TV information only when it was directly contradicted by another source, such as personal contact. Reading was rarely credited as a source of job information.

A growing body of evidence suggests that television's portrayal of occupations has some influence on young people's career outlooks. In 1967, Melvin DeFleur and Lois DeFleur asked children about three kinds of occupations:² (1) those with which children are likely to have direct, personal contact (teacher, mailcarrier, school janitor); (2) those seen often on TV but rarely in real life (lawyer, reporter, butler); and (3) those seen rarely on TV or in real life (electrical engineer, printer, bank president). They found that the children knew the most about the personal-contact jobs but more about the TV-contact jobs than the general-culture-contact jobs. If we assume that the only difference between the TV-contact jobs and the culture-contact jobs is that the former appear on TV, then this study demonstrates that children acquire knowledge about occupational roles from TV. They also found that children are better able to rank jobs according to their prestige in the TV contact category than in the other two; this led them to conclude that TV is a more potent source of information about job status than either personal contact or the general culture.

One aspect of our long-term, ongoing research project—called Cultural Indicators—has been the study of the portrayal of occupations on television and the consequences of that portrayal of adolescents' career choices. Cultural Indicators has been monitoring network television drama ("message system analysis") and assessing its impact on viewers' conceptions of social reality ("cultivation analysis") since 1967. At the end of 1979, the data contained information about 1,500

programs, 4,100 major characters, and 14,200 minor characters. This information is used to describe and analyze the complex but coherent world of television and is then used as the basis for investigating the implications of regular exposure to television's most recurrent messages on people's attitudes, outlooks, and behaviors.

The research has shown that the amount of television viewing makes a distinct, independent contribution to viewers' attitudes and behaviors in terms of violence and victimization, sex roles, age roles, academic achievement, family life, law enforcement, political activity, minorities, and health. In numerous samples of children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly, it was found that heavier viewers of television are more likely than lighter viewers to report outlooks and expectations that are congruent with television's imagery, even when controlling for other factors and information sources, such as education, age, and newspaper reading.

The research is aimed at uncovering the patterns of content and effects of television. The analyses focus on the most stable, recurrent images and not on individual programs or characters. The research also looks at what happens to large numbers of people rather than what a few individuals might learn from television. It is quite likely that some young person may decide to become a doctor because he or she likes Marcus Welby, but the research approach is designed to examine the images of doctors cultivated in large audiences after seeing hundreds of TV doctors over long periods of time.

Underlying all of television's images about the world of work is one dominant, insistent message: the labor force presented on television is largely comprised of professionals. From the earliest content analyses in the 1950s to the present, researchers have continually reached this conclusion. Working-class occupations are vastly underrepresented in television drama.

About 57 percent of all prime-time and weekend daytime major and minor characters are employed. Among prime-time major characters, occupation is a highly common aspect of portrayal; only about 15 percent have no discernible occupation. The two largest groupings are classified as professionals (about 20 percent) and law enforcement agents (about 17 percent). Professionals include doctors, lawyers, astronauts, entertainers, teachers, athletes, clergy, nurses, and accountants. Managers, officials, and proprietors comprise another 10 percent of prime-time major characters.

The remaining categories, particularly the blue-collar jobs, are all relatively small. Clerical and sales workers constitute 3 percent of the prime-time major character population; 4 percent are laborers, repair

workers, factory workers, and skilled and semiskilled crafts persons; another 3 percent are service workers, such as servants and waiters. Four percent are in the military, 3 percent are housewives, less than 1 percent are retired, and only 3 percent are explicitly unemployed. In contrast to these small numbers, 7 percent are criminals. The final 10 percent are mixed or other roles, such as witch, fortune teller, superhero, student, hunter, juror, genie, and aide to king.

Occupational roles on television vary according to the sex of the characters. Jobs are more likely to be part of the way males are portrayed and somewhat less important for females. Nine of ten male television characters can be placed in some occupational category, but no information is given for one of four women. Sometimes the distribution of jobs by sex matches the real world, but more often than not, television occupations are dominated by males (as is the entire world of television, by a ratio of three to one). Although about the same proportion of males and females are classified as professionals, over half of the female professionals are entertainers.

A study by Linda Glennon and Richard Butsch that examined all family programs on television from 1947 to 1977 found that while working-class occupations constitute about 70 percent of the real world labor force, only 6 percent of the television programs featured heads of household with blue-collar jobs.³ One of the major themes of these few shows is upward mobility; dignity is achieved not by being working class but by becoming middle class.

A dozen studies over the last twenty-five years show that the world of television is dominated by active, high-status, glamorous professionals who are portrayed more positively than other major characters. More common, more mundane, and less prestigious workers make up a marginal proportion of their true numbers. The affluence of television professionals is exaggerated; generally they have either already succeeded or are on their way to promising, lucrative careers. In the Glennon and Butsch study, one of four family series featured a servant; servants were found in almost half of all single-parent series.

We are not implying that television must faithfully and accurately reproduce reality; drama involves selection, invention, and amplification. The important question is not whether there are deviations but rather what kinds of deviations exist and what the possible consequences are.

Roles are created according to their usefulness in the television world. Those roles for which television has more use—because they imply adventure, sex, status, or power—are created and cast in

greater numbers than those with more restricted dramatic uses. The result is that the dominant social groups—whether defined by age, sex, or occupation—tend to be overrepresented, usually in a manner that emphasizes their affluence and spending power. Minorities on television—women, the old and the very young, the working classes—have less than their proportionate share of values and resources. Their underrepresentation means that they are portrayed with restricted scope of action, stereotyped roles, diminished life chances, and undervaluation.⁴

Cultural Indicators studied more than 200 adolescents over a three-year period. (In the first year of this project, they were in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.) Each year of this study, it was found that heavy viewing among adolescents correlated with lower aspirations, lower IQs, lower achievement scores, and more traditional values, such as sex-role stereotypes and the desire for early marriage, early childbirth, and large families.

It would be difficult to argue that television content could cultivate lower aspirations, given the virtual invisibility of the working classes on television. More likely, such a relationship might be due to heavy viewing per se; the very act of spending a large amount of time watching television might signal and reinforce a lack of ambition.

But in an examination of the effects of viewing in early adolescence on career goals in later adolescence among the same students, a very different pattern emerged: those who watched more TV when younger had significantly higher aspirations two years later than did lighter viewers. Even controlling for powerful factors like IQ, social class, and age, heavy viewing seems to raise career goals over time. This effect is more pronounced among girls. These findings suggest that television may lead to some real and difficult conflicts. Even girls who want to get married and have children at relatively young ages and even girls who want to have many children are influenced toward jobs with higher prestige. Given our present social situation, it may be difficult for women to mix family responsibilities with working at high-status careers. Few female teenagers will be able to handle the demands of early marriage and large families and at the same time become high-level professionals.

Television may be seen as an influence on adolescents' notions about occupations, much like other social, cultural, and psychological forces. It may be the major or only source of information about many jobs, particularly white-collar professional jobs. Television may make a powerful contribution to adolescents' general career orientations, if not to specific jobs, by cultivating underlying desires, norms,

and expectations. Its repetitive, frequent messages about middle-class affluence and upward mobility, designed ultimately to stimulate the consumption of products and services sold on television, can be seen as reaffirming a great American myth.

References

1. Suzanne Jeffries-Fox, "Television's Contribution to Young People's Conceptions about Occupations" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1978).
2. Melvin L. DeFleur and Lois B. DeFleur, "The Relative Contribution of Television as a Learning Source for Children's Occupational Knowledge," *American Sociological Review* 32 (1967): 777-789.
3. Linda M. Glennon and Richard J. Butsch, "The Devaluation of Working Class Lifestyles in Television Family Series, 1947-1977" (Unpublished manuscript, 1978).
4. George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Nancy Signorielli, and Michael Morgan, "Aging with Television: Images on Television Drama and Conceptions of Social Reality," *Journal of Communication* 30:1 (Winter 1980): 37-47; and George Gerbner and Nancy Signorielli, "Women and Minorities in Television Drama, 1967-1978" (The Annenberg School of Communications, October 1979).