

Draft for comment of 6/8/98; not for release

CASTING AND FATE IN '98  
Fairness and Diversity in Television and Movies  
An Update of the 1993 report

A report to the Screen Actors Guild, June, 1998

by

George Gerbner

Bell Atlantic Professor of Telecommunication, Temple University,  
Philadelphia

A child is born into a home in which television is on an average of more than seven hours a day. For the first time in human history, most of the stories about people and life are told not by parents, schools, churches, or others in the community who have something to tell, but by a group of distant conglomerates that have something to sell.

This is a radical change in the way we employ creative talent and cast the cultural environment. The roles we take and the ways others see us are no longer home-made, hand-crafted, community-inspired. They are produced on the mass media assembly line. Standardization, homogenization, and integration into a global employment and marketing process shape the end product. This is a report based on the study of that product.

The report draws on the Cultural Indicators (CI) research project data archives. CI research began in 1967-68 with a study for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. It continued under the sponsorship of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, The White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, the American Medical Association, the Administration on Aging, the National Science Foundation, the W. Alton Jones Foundation, the Screen Actors Guild, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the National Cable Television Association, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the Turner Broadcasting System, the Ark Trust, Inc., the Mental Health Initiatives, Inc., the Women's Initiative of the American Association for Retired Persons, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, the Sloan Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

This update, as well as the original 1993 study, was commissioned by the Screen Actors Guild as part of its continuing effort to broaden the range of media images of women, racial, ethnic and all age groups, and people with disabilities. The study was conducted by the Cultural Indicators research team at Temple University.<sup>1</sup>

### SAMPLES AND DESIGN

The results are based on the analysis of 10,201 speaking parts appearing in 645 dramatic television programs, taped in 5 normal weeklong samples chosen at random. Dramatic programs are fictional shows, including series, films, and animated cartoons. The samples are:

- (1) Major network (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX) prime time programs (8 to 11 p.m., EST) 1994 through 1997; a total of 440 programs.
- (2) Major network daytime serial drama from four weeks, taped from 1995-1997; 205 programs.

All programs were screened and coded by trained analysts using an extensively tested instrument of analysis. The testing procedure requires the reliable observation by multiple independent coders of various aspects of plot, theme and characterization. Further methodological details can be found in publications listed in the Bibliography. The tabulation of coded observations, the backbone of this report, can be seen in the Tables at the end.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Cultural Indicators project was initiated by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1969 and supported by the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, the American Medical Association, the U.S. Administration on Aging, the National Science Foundation, The Hoso Bunka Foundation, the National Cable Television Association, the Sloan Foundation, the FOrd Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and other organizations. The author of this report is the originator and director of the Cultural Indicators project and co-principal investigator (with Profs. Larry Gross, University of Pennsylvania; Michael Morgan, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; and Nancy Signorielli, University of Delaware) of the research for the television Violence Index and other reports listed in the Bibliography. Results and interpretation are the sole responsibility of the project director. For able assistance and coordination, credit is due to Mariaelena Bartesaghi, Brian Linson, Jennifer Luk, and Nejat Ozyegin

## CASTING PRIME TIME

Americans spend more time with television than with the next ten highest-ranked leisure-time activities put together. During a typical week, the regular viewer of network television can see about 355 characters in prime-time, and almost the same number in daytime. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of that cast is its stability.

Despite changes in ownership, management, stars and styles, casting the world of television in 1997 is much like in 1993, or, for that matter, in 1969, when Cultural Indicators began. The marketing imperative rules television. Advertisers seek novelty but not change. They pay broadcasters for delivering an audience receptive and able to act on their pitch. They track changes in demography and markets, and may support appeals to new customers. But they have no incentive to sponsor programs that undermine the existing structure of power. expose glaring inequities, or feature less powerful, less wealthy, and less healthy customers.-- except, perhaps, as anomalies or threats..

Prime time is macho time. Men, with 63.1 percent of the cast, outnumber women almost three to one. Women's representation increased only 3.6 percent since 1993. (These and other demographic data for the 1994-97 period are summarized in Table 1 at the end of this report.)

Reflecting market trends since the civil rights movement and legislation, the proportion of African Americans increased from 10.8 percent in the 1993 SAG report to 12.3 percent in 1994-97. However, that increase was mostly of African American males.

The proportion of African American men in prime time increased, from 5.8 to 7.8 percent. The increase is not matched by that of African American women. Their representation grew only from 4.6 percent to 5.2 percent average in 1994-97.

Figure 1 shows relative changes in proportional representation by race and gender. The bars are Index values relating to what would be the accurate proportional representation according to U.S. census figures, indicated by the horizontal line at Index value 1. Bars reaching above that 1line indicate over representation, bars below that line show under representation. Similarly, the index number in

Table 1 over 1.00 mark indicates over representation and under 1.00 shows under representation.

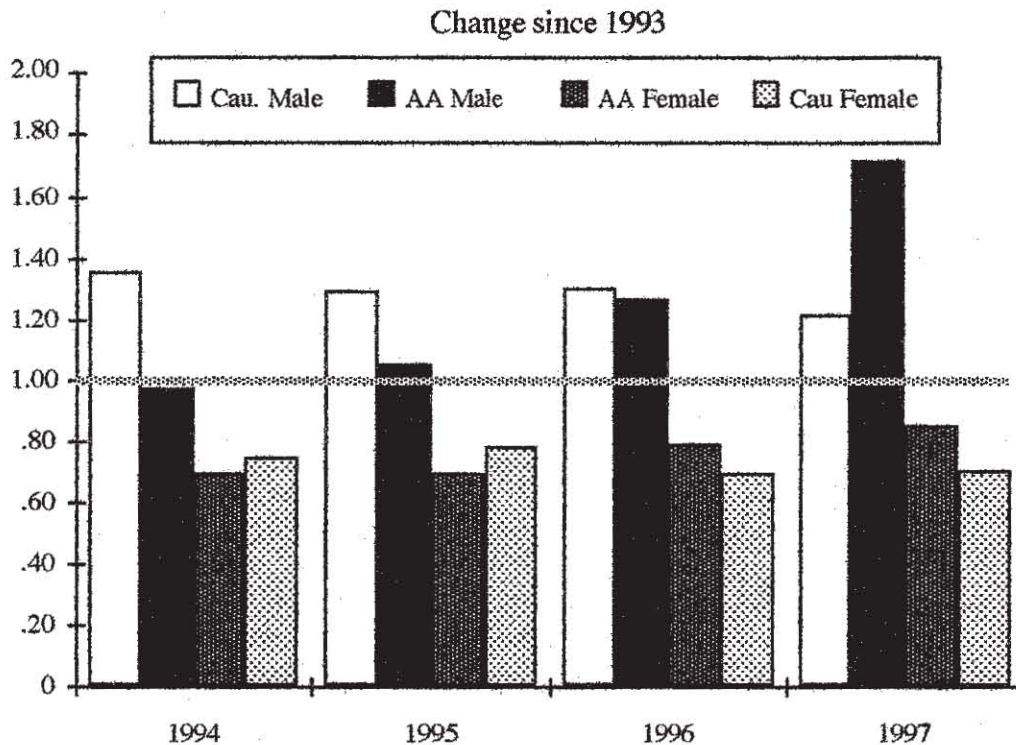


Figure 1. Annual changes in TV gender and race proportionate representation. An index value of 1 indicates accurate representation according to 1996 US Census.

It can be seen in Figure 1 and the Table that follows (that indexes the deviations from the proportionately correct representation marked by line 1) that while white male proportionate representation (exceeding the "correct" line), and all female representations (falling short of the "correct line"), remained relatively stable, the representation of African American males in prime time increased each year until it reached 185 percent of its real-life proportion in 1997.

#### Proportionate representation in gender and race, 1994-1997

Demographic Categories	1994	1995	1996	1997
White Male	1.36	1.29	1.30	1.14
Afric.-Amer. Male	.97	1.05	1.26	1.85

Afric.-Amer. Female	.69	.69	.79	.76
White Female	.75	.78	.69	.66

As shown in the Table above, other minority groups are treated differently from African Americans. Instead of masking the facts with hype, they are hidden from sight. Both Latino/Hispanic characters and Asian Americans are less than one-third of their true proportion of the population, with 2.6 percent and 1.4 percent of the cast in 1994-1997, respectively. However, even that is more than double of what was found in the 1993 study.

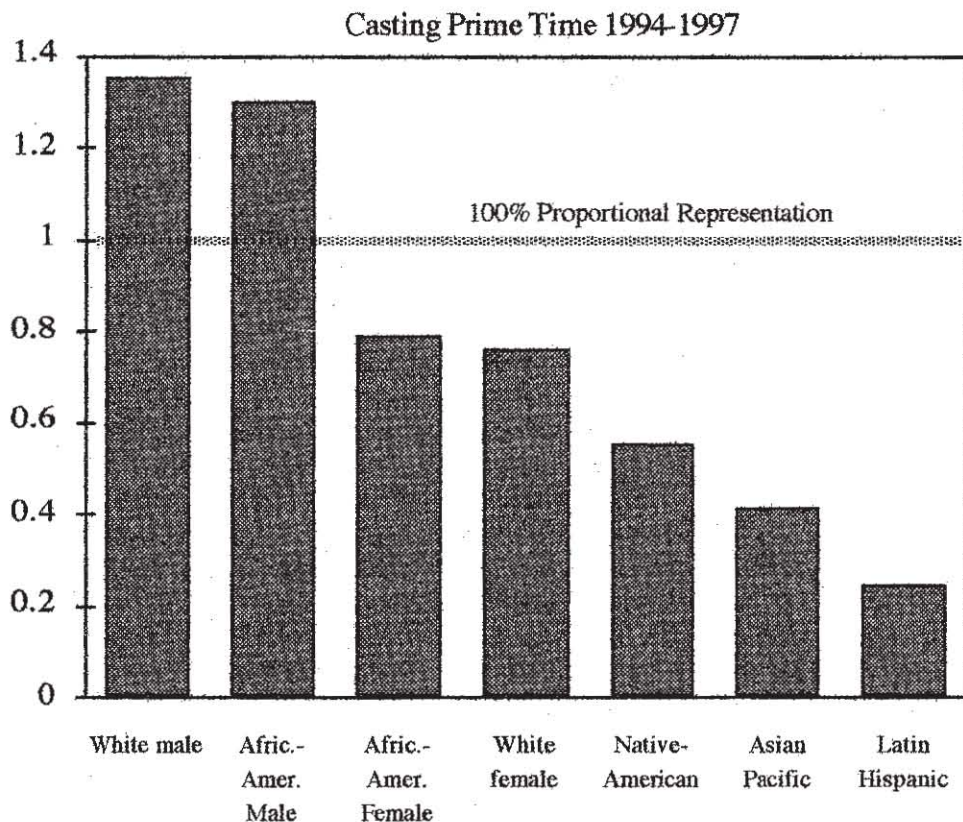


Figure 2. The cast of all (6,460) speaking parts of human characters sampled from prime time network television drama from 1994-97. "Proportional Index" in the Table below refers to deviations from the 100 percent representation line.

### TV Proportional Index: Casting the world of television, in 1997

Demographic Categories	ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX Proportion of TV characters	Proportion al Index	US Census % of actual US Population
White Male	55.0%	1.35	40.7%
Afric.-Amer. Male	7.8%	1.30	6.0%
Afric.-Amer. Female	5.2%	.79	6.6%
White Female	31.9%	.76	42.0%
Native American	0.4%	.55	0.7%
Latin./Hisp.	2.6%	.41	10.7%
Asian-Pac.	1.4%	.25	3.4%

Aging on television is equally skewed (see Figure 3). Children are virtually absent in prime time. Young and middle-aged adults, 25-45 years old, dominate the cast with 64.6 percent. Characters 65 or over make up only 2.8 percent of prime time cast, about one-fifth of their true proportion of the population.

The gender imbalance makes these distortions even more glaring. Bluntly put, women age faster than men. Almost nine out of 10 women are below age 46. Their proportion peaks at 30, then drops sharply.

Men age more gracefully. While women begin to vanish from the scene after age 30, men just begin to peak. Figure 1 is a graphic comparison of age trends on television and in reality. It shows that while the percentages of both women and men between 25 and 35 over represent those age groups, men after age 40 decline more slowly than women. For example, the proportion of women at age 40 matches that of the U.S. census. But the proportion of men at age 40 is more than double that of the U.S. census. After 40, women's share drops precipitously while men's declines more gently. At ages 55 to 64, men's representation matches that of the census, while women's falls far below and disappears soon thereafter.

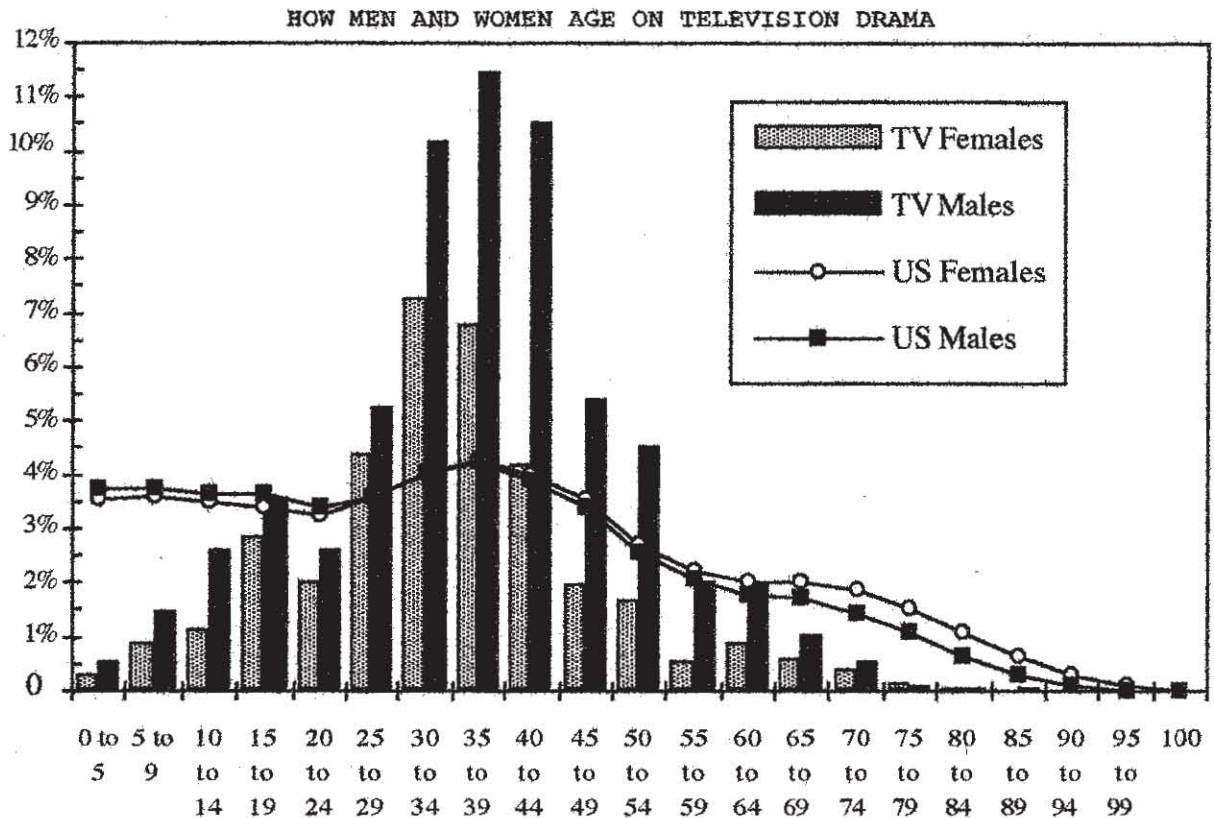


Figure 3. Age and gender distribution of the prime time major network television cast in 1997, compared with US Census figures.

As women age in prime time, they also stop engaging in sexual interaction as often as men. Females characters from 1 years old to 19 engage in verbal or physical sexual interaction in 25.6 percent of their appearances in episodes of programs, versus 16.9 percent for boys. Female characters from 18-39 years old have sexual interaction in 39.1 percent of their appearances in episodes. But for women after age forty such interaction decreases to 21.3 percent. Men of these groups enjoy a less sharp decline in sex interaction through age, from 27.7 percent to 18.2 percent.

Poor people are virtually invisible on television. The U.S. census classifies more than 13 percent of the population (and one-third of African-Americans) at or below the poverty level, and many more as low-income wage-earners. But on television, the "poor" make up only 1.4 percent of major characters in prime time, 1.2 percent in daytime, and half that (0.6 percent) in children's programs.

The world of prime time television is as healthy as it is wealthy. Virtually all (98.1 percent) of the characters are unafflicted with any disability, mental or physical. Disabled characters, however, are more likely to be spotlighted when they do appear. 3 out of 4 disabled characters played central roles or had extensive airtime in the episodes in which they appeared.

The characters portrayed as suffering from mental illness are the most dangerous of all demographic groups, over 4.5 times more frequently to be cast as criminals or villains and 3 times more likely to commit violence than those without illness, perpetuating a stigma of the most damaging kind. By contrast, characters with *physical* disabilities were not cast as villains or criminals.

### Casting Daytime Serials

Daytime drama is more white and more female than prime time. Female characters increase by one-third to 48 percent of all characters. However, minority groups decrease by a third, to 13.9 percent.

Figure 4 presents the daytime age distribution. It peaks earlier than in prime time, and it favors men with a longer mid-life span. However, the age distribution is more even-handed than in prime time. Women do not drop as sharply at age 35, and men do not enjoy 20 years of comparative overrepresentation.

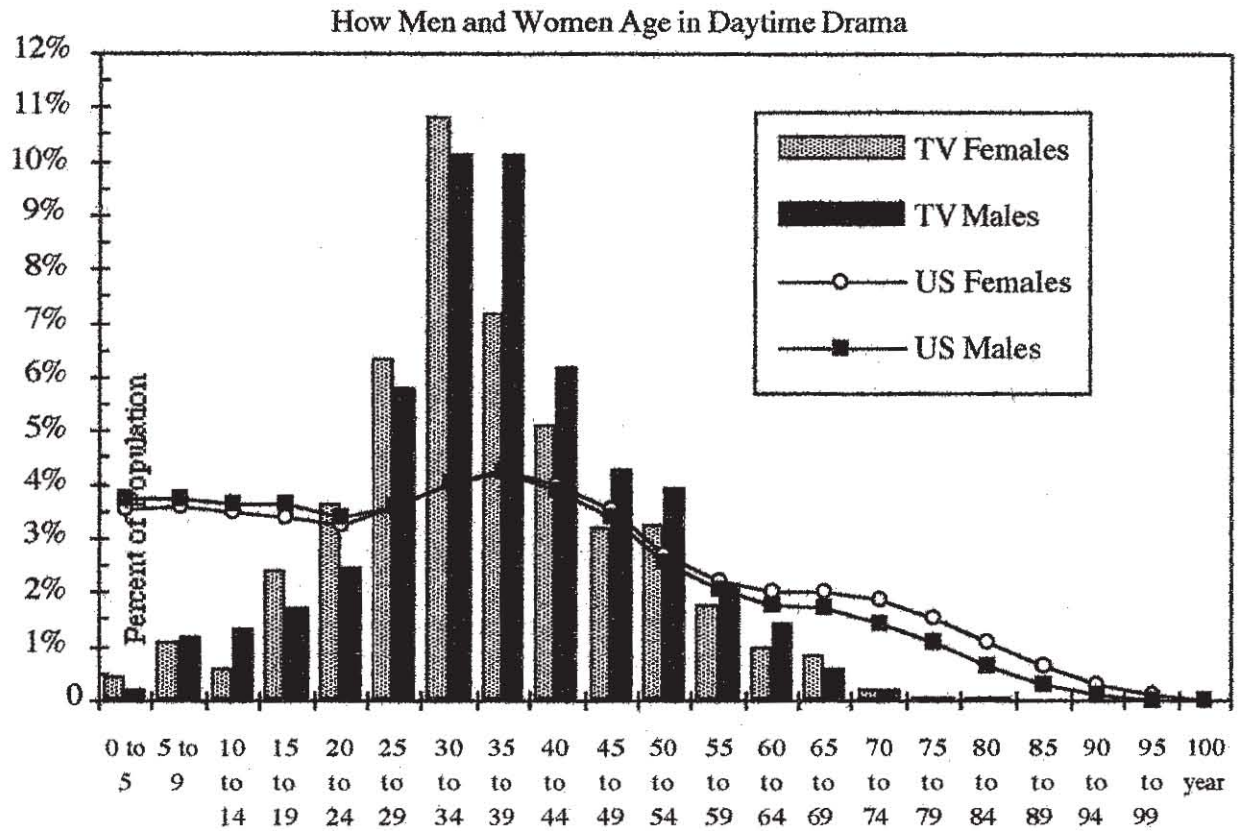


Figure 4. Age and gender distribution of characters in daytime serial drama compared to US Census figures for the same years.

### FATE

"Fate" is the positive ("good" or "hero") or negative ("bad" or "villain") role and successful ("winner") or failing ("loser") outcome to which characters are destined.. (When fate, as defined, could not be determined, the character was omitted from this analysis.)

Heroes outnumber villains, but the balance depends on gender, age, and other factors. . For every "bad" man in prime time there is a "good" man, but for every "bad" woman there are about 4.5 "good" women, in prime-time. In daytime drama, male and female heroes both outnumber villains by about two to one. But older women bear a disproportionate burden of negative characterizations.

Characters portrayed as suffering from mental illness are depicted as the most dangerous of all demographic groups, with 60.0 percent

shown to be involved in crime or violence (three times the average rate), perpetuating a stigma of the most damaging kind.

Figure 5 shows that characters with mental disabilities are 4 times more likely to be criminals or villains and 3 times more likely to commit violence than people without disability. The second more dangerous characters on prime time television are those of foreign origin.

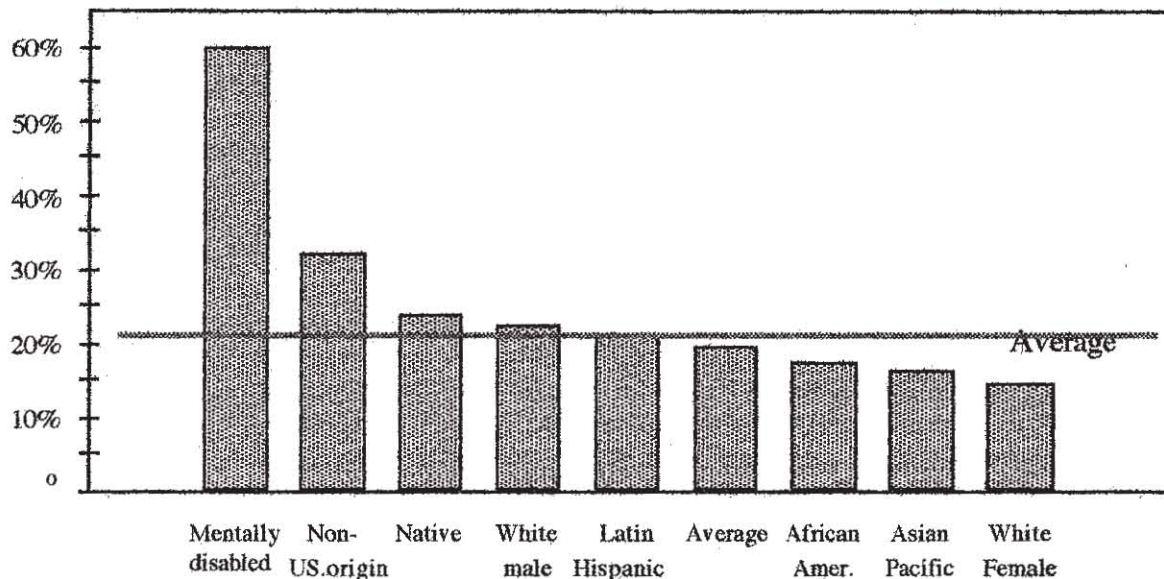


Figure 5. Rates of involvement in violence and crime for various demographic groups in Prime time television

Almost two-thirds ( 63.4) of prime time characters succeed and 6.6 percent fail. Villains, of course, do not fare as well: only 11.8 percent succeed and 59.8 percent fail.

While Latino/Hispanic and Asian/Pacific characters in the 1993 study had higher ratios of failures than others, in 1997 the only characters who fail more than white males are those with foreign national origin and with mental disability. The ratios of failures per success are 1.22 (mental disability), 0.72 (non-US origin), 0.56 (white males) 0.56 (Asian Pacific), 0.55 (Latino/Hispanic) 0.35 (all women) and 0.33 (African-American).

## CONCLUSIONS

These comments summarize the highlights of both the 1993 and the present studies.

Minorities are made, not born. Gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, and disability define society's power structure. Their portrayals affect how we see ourselves and each other. The world of television seems to be frozen in a time-warp of obsolete and damaging representations.

Women play one out of three roles in prime time television. They fall short of majority even in daytime serials. They age faster than men, and as they age they are more likely to be portrayed as sexless and evil.

Seniors of both genders are greatly underrepresented and seem to be vanishing instead of increasing as in real life. As characters age they lose importance, value, and effectiveness. Mature women seem to be especially hard to cast -- and hard to take. They are disproportionately underrepresented, undervalued, and undersexed.

People of color, estimated to reach a majority in America by the year 2000, are 18 percent of prime time network characters... African-Americans are 12.3 percent of prime-time, but Latino/Hispanics, over 10 percent of the U.S. population, are about 2.6 percent of prime time and 3.7 percent of daytime serials. Americans of Asian/Pacific origin, 3.4 percent of the U.S. population, also suffer conspicuous by their virtual absence as 1.4 percent of prime time and 0.4 percent of daytime roles. Minorities are more likely to play minor than major parts. The world of daytime serials is even more "white" than prime time.

As the 43 million disabled American gain legal rights of equal access and employment in real life, physical disability is visible in only 0.7 percent of characters. Mental illness is portrayed in 1.2 percent of prime-time characters. Mentally ill characters are presented as bad people who fare badly in all types of programs.

If prime time is a time of macho adventures, family comedies, and societal power-plays, daytime is a time of interior turbulence. Its sexual and marital themes raise female representation but reduce social diversity below that of prime time.

In general a disproportionate number of ill-fated characters comes from the ranks of poor, Latino and foreign men, and both young and old, African-American, and poor women. At the bottom of fate's "pecking order" are characters portrayed as old women and as mentally ill, perpetuating stigma of the most damaging kinds.

These results present the record of television performance and policy. They show not what the industry says or thinks it does but what it actually presents on the public's airways. Therefore, they provide a basis for judgment and action regarding employment, casting, and programming policies vital to a democratic society.

TABLE 1: Demography of Cast of Characters In Prime Time Dramatic Programs, 1994-97

CATEGORIES	All Characters			Major Characters			Minor Characters		
	Males	Fem.	Total*	Males	Fem.	Total*	Males	Fem.	Total*
All characters	4340	2528	6882	736	470	1207	3604	2058	5675
All characters	63.1	36.7	100.0	61.0	38.9	100.0	63.5	36.3	100.0
<b>ETHNICITY</b>									
White	82.0	81.6	81.7	83.6	87.2	84.9	81.9	80.3	81.2
African American	11.6	13.4	12.3	10.3	9.6	10.0	11.9	14.3	12.7
Latino Hispanic	2.7	2.5	2.6	3.1	1.5	2.5	2.6	2.7	2.6
Asian Pacific	1.4	1.3	1.4	0.7	0.6	0.7	1.4	1.5	1.5
Fictional, Other	2.4	1.2	2.0	2.3	1.1	1.8	2.1	1.2	1.8
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>AGE</b>									
Child	11.4	11.7	11.5	7.6	10.0	8.5	12.1	12.1	12.1
Young Adult	29.8	36.6	32.2	30.6	39.1	33.9	29.6	36.1	31.9
Settled Adult	57.9	50.7	55.2	60.7	50.4	56.7	57.4	50.8	54.8
Old	0.5	0.8	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.9	0.7
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>DISABILITY</b>									
Mental	1.0	1.5	1.2	1.4	2.3	1.7	0.4	0.2	0.3
Physical	0.8	0.5	0.7	1.0	0.4	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.4
<b>NAT'L ORIGIN</b>									
US	92.4	94.4	92.9	90.8	95.1	92.4	92.7	94.2	93.0
Europe	2.7	2.1	2.5	3.7	1.9	3.0	4.8	2.1	3.8
Other	1.4	1.1	1.3	1.4	0.9	1.2	1.4	1.2	1.3

\*Total number includes 14 characters for whom gender is not identifiable.

Characters from prime time dramatic programming broadcast on ABC, CBS, NBC and FOX during four weeklong samples from each network randomly selected from 1994 to 1997

Characters from daytime serial drama broadcast on ABC, CBS and NBC and FOX

TABLE 2: Demography of Cast of Characters  
in Daytime Serial Dramatic Programs, 1995-97

CATEGORIES	All Characters			Major Characters			Minor Characters		
	Male s	Fem. l	Tota l	Male s	Fem. l	Tota l	Male s	Fem. l	Tota l
All characters	1438	1324	2762	282	279	561	1156	1045	2201
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
All characters	52.1	47.9	100.0	50.3	49.7	100.0	52.5	47.5	100.0
<b>ETHNICITY</b>									
White	85.4	87.2	86.3	83.7	91.0	87.3	86.2	86.4	86.4
African American	9.4	9.2	9.3	9.6	6.8	8.2	9.3	9.9	9.6
Latino Hispanic	4.5	2.9	3.7	6.4	1.8	4.1	4.1	3.3	3.7
Asian Pacific	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5
Fictional, Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>AGE</b>									
Child	7.0	6.3	6.7	3.5	3.9	3.7	8.0	7.0	7.5
Young Adult	32.0	39.4	35.5	38.7	32.3	35.5	32.0	39.4	35.6
Settled Adult	60.1	54.2	57.3	64.2	56.6	60.4	59.3	53.7	56.7
Old	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.0	0.4	0.2	0.5	0.1	0.3
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>DISABILITY</b>									
Mental	1.1	1.7	1.4	1.8	3.9	2.9	0.7	0.2	0.5
Physical	1.1	1.0	1.0	0.7	1.8	1.2	1.3	0.5	0.9
<b>NAT'L ORIGIN</b>									
US	94.6	99.1	96.7	93.6	98.6	96.1	95.1	98.7	96.9
Europe	4.7	0.8	2.8	6.4	1.4	3.9	4.4	0.7	2.6
Other	0.5	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5

Characters from daytime serial drama broadcast on ABC, CBS and NBC during three sample weeks