Growing Older: Perceptions and Representations

Aging with Television: Images on Television Drama and Conceptions of Social Reality

by George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Nancy Signorielli, and Michael Morgan

Gross under-representations lead viewers to believe that old people are a vanishing breed; men seem to age slower and enjoy life longer than women.

Aging is a process that starts with birth and goes on throughout life. Life styles associated with different stages of the life cycle are roles learned in a culture. Images of old age cultivate our concept of aging and the age roles we assume.

Television, as the wholesale distributor of images and the mainstream of our popular culture, presents a world of places, people, and roles. Most of us experience this world with little selectivity or deviation and do so for an average of 30

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hours a week. Moreover, network drama is the locus of this time, and our most common, constant, and vivid learning environment.

Our research looks at the distribution of age roles in the symbolic worlds of prime-time and weekend daytime (children's) network television drama. Because we are interested in aggregate systems of messages, we do not focus on single programs, networks, or productions, or on individual viewing habits; we try to reflect what large communities absorb over long periods of time.

The research design (which has been described in full earlier; see 2, 3) consists of two interrelated procedures: the periodic content analysis of samples of prime-time and weekend daytime network television dramatic programming (message system analysis), and the analysis of survey data on attitudes and opinions to determine how conceptions of social reality are affected by television viewing habits (cultivation analysis).

Our sample includes all dramatic programming on all three networks aired during one week of prime time (8-11 p.m. EST) and weekend daytime (8 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday) in the fall of each year from 1969 through 1978. In addition, the sample includes data from prime-time and weekend daytime dramatic programs broadcast during one week each in the springs of 1975 and 1976. Dramatic programs include television plays, movies shown on television, and cartoons with a fictional story line, as well as situation comedies and crime-action shows. All speaking characters were analyzed; major characters (those who portray leading roles) were given special attention. The complete sample includes a total of 1365 programs and 16,688 characters.

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 categories are children 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 characters we also coded three aspects of characterization: evaluation ("good" or "bad"), success (whether or not the character achieves what he/she sets out to do or otherwise exhibits characteristics indicative of success), and the type of role (comic, serious, or mixed) in which a character is cast. A reliability analysis was done to insure that the observations did not reflect instrument ambiguity or observer bias. Only those items meeting acceptable reliability levels were included in the analyses (see 5, 6). The distribution of the characters in the sample by program time, role, and sex can be seen in Table 1. The numbers represent averages over the 10 years of analysis.

Our analysis showed that age is a strong determinant of who appears most and gains most on television. Figure 1 shows the age distribution in real life and in the world of prime-time dramatic 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 grossly under-represents both young and old people. More than half of TV's dramatic population is between 25 and 45. Individuals under 18, who number about 30 percent of the U.S. population, make up only 8 percent of the fictional population. Those

Table 1: Characters and programs analyzed in prime-time and weekend daytime television drama, 1969–1978

	All (N)	Prime time (N)	Daytime (N)
Programs	1365	821	544
Major characters			
All	3719	2349	1370
Male	2783	1673	1110
Female	881	674	207
Minor characters			
All	12969	9405	3564
Male	9487	6869	2618
Female	3185	2490	695
All characters			
All	16688	11754	4934
Male	12270	8542	3728
Female	4066	3164	902

over 65, comprising about 11 percent of the U.S. population, make up 2.3 percent of the fictional population.

Rather strikingly, while this pattern of distribution does not exist in our real life population, it does appear to reflect the distribution of consumer income by age. Television's prime-time population may well be seen as a mirror of the audience referred to by the industry as the "prime demographic market."

Figure 2 compares weekend daytime and prime-time age distributions. It shows that weekend daytime television is different in that the mid-teens (especially major characters) number more than their real-life share. Children's viewing time has even fewer people over 65 than does prime time; only 1.4 percent of all weekend daytime characters are 65 or older.

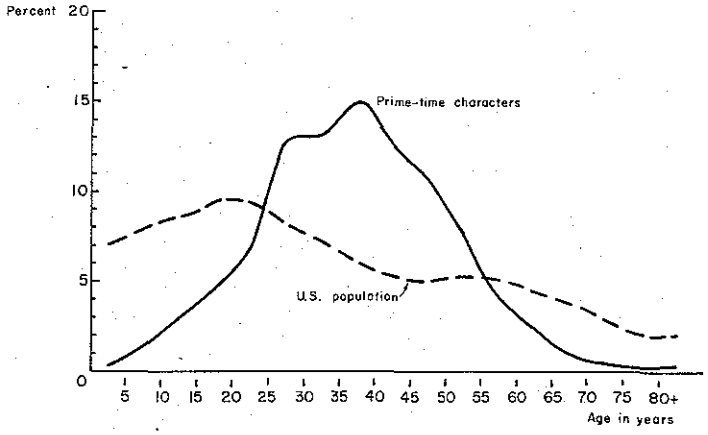

Figure 1: Percentages of U.S. population and all prime-time TV characters by chronological age

Another big difference is that characters in their twenties and early thirties, prominent in prime time, are reduced by half in children's program time. The age group of the parents of young children has a low profile, as does the age group of their grandparents.

In the world of prime-time television drama—as in most mass media—men outnumber women about three to one.

This fact has profound consequences for all that happens in that world, from patterns of aging and employment to sex and violence. Women actually outnumber men among characters in their early twenties, when their function as romantic partners 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 declines.

The percent of men and women in each age group is shown in Figure 3. The age distribution of females, compared to that of males, favors young girls and women under 35. While women are most concentrated, with almost a third of their total numbers, in the 25 to 34 age bracket, men are the 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. Television perpetuates an inequitable and unfair—if conventional—pattern.

Figure 4 shows the pattern in children's programs. Over half of all females are under 21, but only 28 percent of all males are under 21. The second hump is all male. The most visible male age group is that between 35 and 45. Fully one-third of all men in weekend daytime programming fall into that group.

The patterns of prime time are even stronger in weekend daytime programs, as men and women over 45 become progressively less visible. Women over 65,

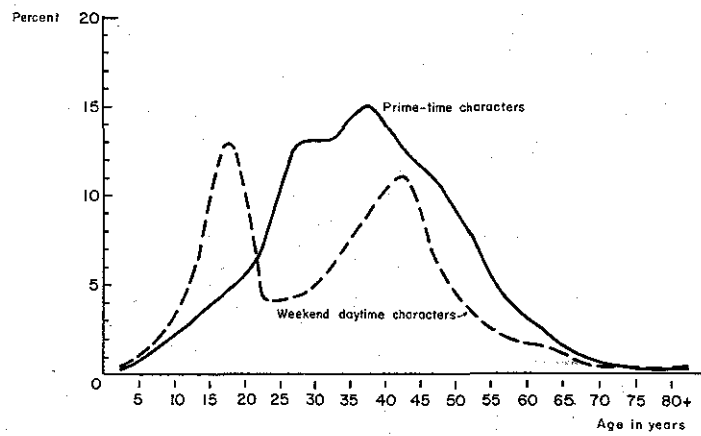

Figure 2: Percentages of all prime-time and all weekend daytime (children's) TV characters by chronological age

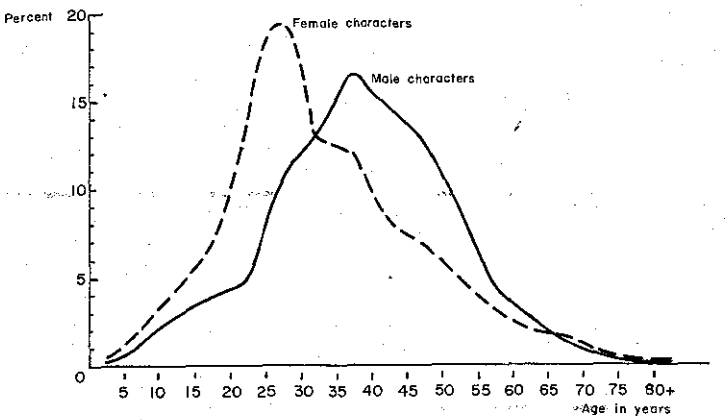

Figure 3: Percentages of all prime-time TV characters by chronological age and gender

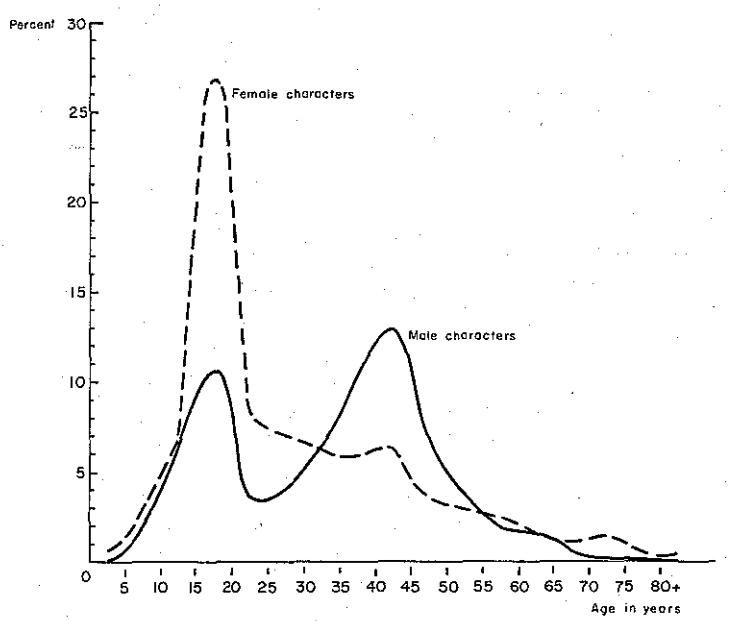

Figure 4: Percentages of all weekend daytime (children's) TV characters by chronological age and gender

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 2 percent of the men.

Figure 5 compares the age distributions of white and non-white men and women in prime time. It shows that while white men dominate the age of dra-

matic 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. Age as a resource cuts two ways for race as well as for gender. The distributions do not change much from year to year; the age structure of the world of television is a stable one.

The distribution of age roles by race and gender shows the value structure of the symbolic world. 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 than those whose dramatic uses are more restricted. We do not wish to imply that faithful proportional representation of reality is necessarily desirable. Artistic and dramatic functions require selection, amplification, and invention, all of which may deviate from what the census reports or what independent experience reflects. The important question is not so much whether there are deviations, but what *kind* exist and with what consequences for thinking and action.

Women on television "age" faster than men. As women age, they are cast for roles that decrease their romantic possibilities. As shown in Figure 6, a comparison between chronological age and social age categories of prime-time major characters reveals that as early as the teen years, the percentage of female major characters (38 percent) assigned to the older social and dramatic category of young adults is greater than the percentage of males of the same age (30 percent) assigned to such roles. In their twenties, only 26 percent of the men but 33 percent of the women are cast as settled adults (the rest are of course young adults). Among characters from 55 to 64, only 22 percent of the men but 33 per-

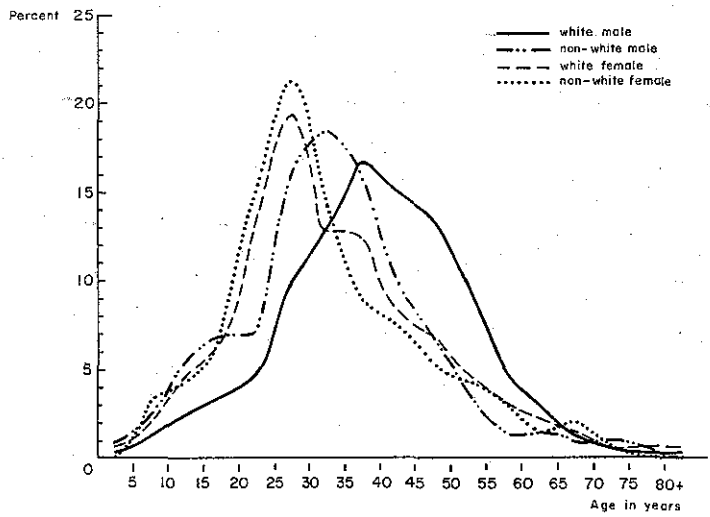

Figure 5: Percentages of all prime-time white and non-white TV characters by chronological age and gender

cent of the women are cast as old characters. Among characters 65 and over, 28 percent of the men still play settled adult roles and 72 percent are cast as old, but 90 percent of women of the same chronological age are cast as old.

Characterization of major characters in prime-time drama also varies according to age.

On the evaluation of characters as "good" or "bad," less than 15 percent of the major characters are classified as "bad." Figure 7 illustrates the proportion of "good" and "bad" characters among male and female major characters of different ages. As males age, proportionately more are portrayed as "bad." For females, proportionately more girls are portrayed as "bad" than are young or middle-aged women. More older women, though, are portrayed as "bad." The most obvious and important difference is that proportionately fewer older characters are "good," while the proportion of "bad" older characters (especially men) is greater than in the younger age groups.

Age-related chances for success are illustrated in Figure 8. The percent of successful men increases with age, but as women age, the percent who are successful see-saws and then drops to 16 percent. In fact, more older women are unsuccessful than are successful. We do not find this for any other group.

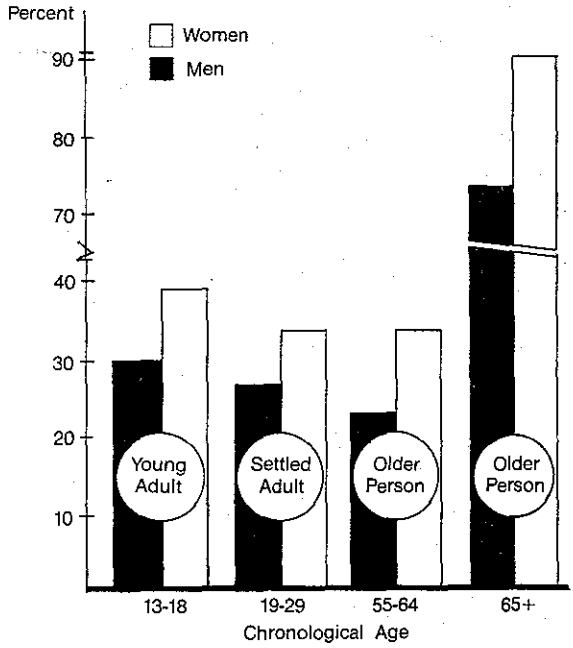

Figure 6: Percentages of major prime-time TV characters cast in social age categories by their chronological age and gender

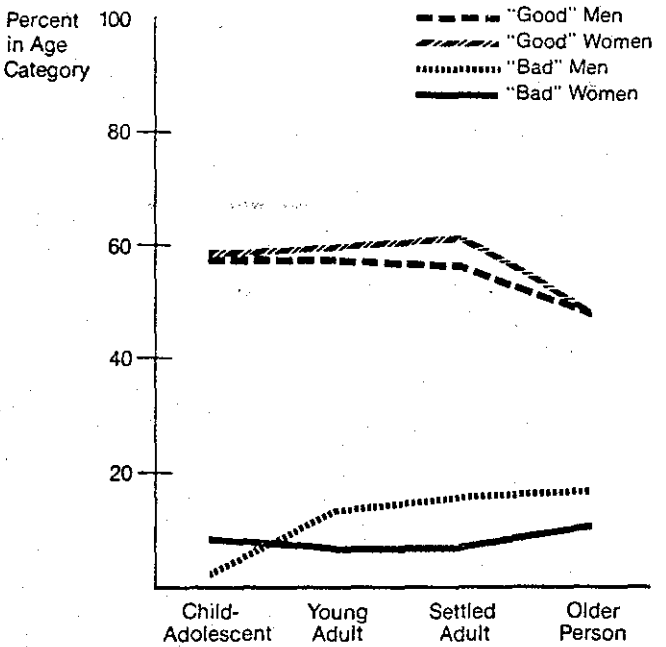

Figure 7: Percentages of "good" and "bad" major prime-time TV characters in social age categories by gender

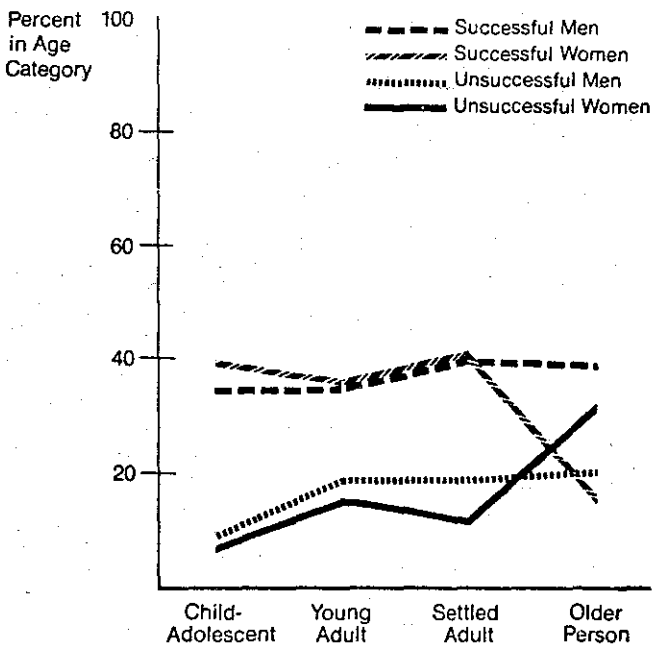

Figure 8: Percentages of successful and unsuccessful major prime-time TV characters in social age categories by gender

Casting a character in a comic, serious, or mixed role is also related to age. As Figure 9 shows, the elderly, especially older men, are less likely to portray serious roles than are characters of younger age, and older men are much more likely than younger men to be cast in a comic role.

Major characters in a special sample of prime-time programs whose casts included elderly characters were rated on several personality attribute scales. These scales include whether characters are treated with disrespect or pity, and whether they were 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. This male-female distinction is not salient in the other age groups.

What are the lessons viewers derive from television drama about growing old and being old in our society? To investigate the conceptions of age among television viewers, we did a cultivation analysis based on data from the National Council on Aging's "Myth and Reality of Aging" survey which was conducted by Louis Harris and Associates in 1974. We constructed an index of the concep-

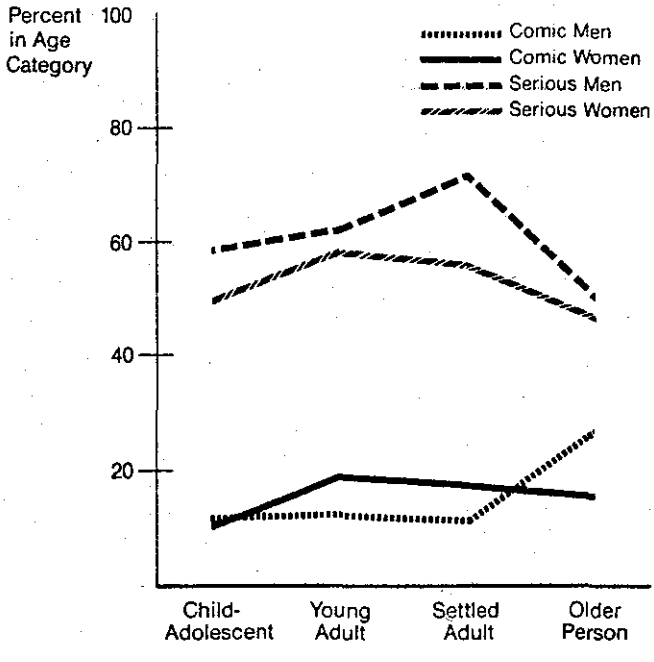

Figure 9: Percentages of comic and serious major prime-time TV characters in social age categories by gender

tion of older people from responses to statements asserting that the number, the health, and the longevity of older people are declining. Factor analysis revealed that these three statements measured a single dimension. (The variables produce a moderate but acceptable alpha of .56 and more than adequately pass a series of validity checks; see 4.) Thus 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, and especially young 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 of .10 ($p < .001$) is not reduced by controls for education, income, sex, or age, and it is much stronger for younger people; the correlation is .20 for those under thirty. 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 survey findings also suggest that television cultivates negative images of the elderly. Heavy viewers are more likely 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. Perhaps, since young people are more "distant" from old age and tend to have less direct experience with it, they are more vulnerable to television's messages. The absence of first-hand information may increase the salience of the television imagery. In fact, the relationships cited above are stronger—even within the youngest age group—among those who have little contact with the elderly.

However, it is also possible that younger people are more susceptible to these messages because most of them have never lived without television. It is not necessarily the case that they will "grow out" of this as they age and learn more about aging from diverse sources. It is possible to wonder whether in the years to come we will no longer see these persistent variations between age groups in their conceptions of old people.

We found similar patterns in our own studies of adolescents.

When we asked about 600 sixth- to ninth-graders (see 2 for a description of this sample), "At what age does a man become elderly or old?" and "At what age does a women become elderly or old?", overall they responded that both men and women become old at about 55. But light viewers gave the age as about 57, while heavy viewers felt that people become old at 51. (For almost every comparison and within almost every subgroup, these adolescents believe women become old before men do.) The overall correlation of $-.21$ is only slightly reduced by controls for IQ, social class, sex, and grade in school.

These relationships should not be overstated. Although they all are significant, they range from small to moderate. However, amount of viewing *does* make a difference. In every case, heavier viewing makes a consistently negative contribution to the public's image of the personal characteristics of the elderly, and the quality of their lives. We did not find watching television to be associated with *any* positive images of older people. 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.

On the other hand, we are not a "youth culture" either, as our research shows that we under-represent, and in many ways devalue, children and adolescents (1), as well as old people. Culturally, in the roles that television provides us, age is treated as a resource to be distributed as other resources are distributed—along lines of income, status, and power.

These patterns are not the creation of single individuals or groups. They are the creation of a system of broadcasting and of story-telling with deep historical, cultural, and commercial roots. This system allows very few degrees of freedom. But within those few degrees, the creative workers and the executives of the industry can act—provided they have the information upon which to act. A purpose of this research was to provide that information.

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