

ABSTRACT

Minorities and Television: Portrayals in Prime-Time Drama
and Conceptions of Social Reality

Michael Morgan, Ph.D.
and
Nancy Signorielli, Ph.D.

The Annenberg School of Communications
University of Pennsylvania

In the last few decades, television has become the mainstream of the symbolic cultural environment that affects much of what most people think and do. Public perceptions of and responses to issues, policies, people, products, and institutions can no longer be fully understood without also assessing their most centralized and pervasive source -- the world of television.

This research investigated television's contribution to public conceptions of blacks and racial relations. It focuses on those crucial features which constitute the personal and social context in which racially-related interactions are experienced in America. In short, it assesses and interprets in terms of two explanatory processes -- mainstreaming and resonance -- what viewers learn from television's most vivid lessons -- its dramatic fare -- about minorities.

This study is part of the ongoing Cultural Indicators research project and consisted of two interrelated parts: (1) Message System Analysis -- monitoring the world of television and (2) Cultivation Analysis -- determining the conceptions of social reality that television tends to cultivate in

different groups of viewers.

In the first part of the study, data archives of Message System Analysis were used to isolate the image of minorities over eleven years of prime-time network dramatic programming. Thus far, the analysis shows that most specific minority groups -- blacks, hispanics, native Americans -- are slightly under-represented* and that the television population is skewed in favor of males, especially white males. Overall, 63 percent of the prime-time dramatic population are white males, 24 percent are white women, 9 percent are minority men and 3 percent are minority women. Both whites and minority males are over-represented in regard to their numbers in the U.S. population (white males by a factor of a half and minority males by a factor of a third), while women are under-represented (white females by a factor of a half and minority women by a factor of four-tenths).

Some other racially-related differences in character portrayals are found in the world of work. Specifically we have found that about 20 percent of white men and women are cast as professionals while only 7 percent of minority men and 9 percent of minority women are so portrayed. Moreover, while blue collar workers are under-represented among all four racial groups, they are a little more prevalent among the minority males (9 percent of non-white males are blue collar workers). Along the same lines, minority women are much more likely than white women to be portrayed as housewives.

Specifically 24 percent of the non-white women as compared to only 9 percent

* Orientals are an exception, they are over-represented in relation to their numbers in the U.S. population. See George Gerbner and Nancy Signorielli. "Women and Minorities in Television Drama: 1969-1978," The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1979.

of white women are so cast. Finally, as many other researchers* have noted we have found that in prime time minority characters are a little more likely to be cast in comic roles and found in situation comedies; they are also a little less likely than white characters to be cast as "bad" or unsuccessful.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of television's portrayals of racial groups is the consistent tendency to keep them separate. Weigel, et al.'s recent analysis** shows that while blacks appear in a large percentage of programs and commercials, co-appearances of black and white characters comprise only about 4 or 5 percent of total human appearance time. Furthermore, black and white characters are shown interacting in only about 2 percent of total human appearance time. Our analysis of close personal relationships, and theirs of appearance time, both reveal that cross-racial interactions occur in a work situation. Outside of the workplace, the message seems to be that blacks and whites rarely interact or have close

* Bradley S. Greenberg and Pilar Baptista-Fernandez. "Hispanic-Americans - the New Minority in Television" in B.S. Greenberg (ed.) Life on Television: Content Analysis of U.S. Television Drama, Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1980, 3-12.

U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television, 1977; also U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Window Dressing on the Set: An Update, 1979.

John F. Seggar. "Television's Portrayal of Minorities and Women," Journal of Broadcasting, 1977, 21, 435-446.

** Russell H. Weigel, James W. Loomis, and Matthew J. Soja. "Race Relations on Prime Time Television," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1980, 39:5, 884-893.

personal relationships.

The consequences of this message on viewers' attitudes was investigated through a secondary analysis of data from the 1975, 1977, 1978, and 1980 General Social Surveys.* These secondary analyses were conducted to determine whether or not heavy television viewers, other things held constant, are more likely to support racial segregation. In this analysis we developed specialized indices that tap six dimensions of respondents' attitudes toward blacks and (among blacks) self-perceptions. These indices, all of which exhibit internal consistency, primarily focus upon issues relating to support for segregation in schools, housing, marriage, etc.

Analyses of the relationship between amount of television viewing and attitudes towards blacks along these six dimensions show intriguing differential patterns across subgroups. In general, heavy viewing among whites is associated with the desire to keep the races separate only among those groups who "otherwise" are least prejudiced -- better educated, self-designated liberals, with higher incomes and higher occupational prestige. In the counterparts of these groups, associations with television are zero or significantly in the opposite direction. The overall result is interpreted as evidence of "mainstreaming" in which differences deriving from other influences are reduced or eliminated among heavy viewers. In addition, the cultivation of segregationist beliefs is strongest among those with the least actual contact with blacks.

For blacks, the opposite pattern emerges. Although the number of

* Conducted for the National Data Program for the Social Sciences at the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

black respondents is quite small, the data suggest that greater viewing among blacks goes with diminished concern for maintaining racial boundaries. This is particularly strong for those groups of blacks who are more likely to favor integration (e.g., blacks with more education).

These findings apply mainly to the 1977 General Social Survey which contains the largest concentration of race-related questions. Analysis of the few repeated individual items suggests that the associations are fairly stable over time, with some fluctuation.

Physical illness including injury requiring treatment appears in almost 40 percent of prime-time programs and is a significant part of the plot in 12 percent and a major part of the plot in 5 percent of these programs. Mental illness and physical handicaps appear somewhat less frequently -- mental illness appears in 16.7 percent of all prime-time programs (a significant part of the plot in 5.9 percent and a major focus of the story in 2.0 percent), while physical handicaps appear in 11.1 percent of all prime-time programs (a significant theme in 2.6 percent and a major focus in only .1 percent of these programs).

These health-related themes appear even less frequently in weekend-daytime (children's) programs. Physical illness appears in 11.6 percent, mental illness in 2.6 percent and physical handicaps in 3.5 percent of these children's programs. Moreover, in children's programming, health-related themes are rarely presented as significant or major features of the plot.

For the most part, programs with these three health-related themes do not differ from typical prime-time or weekend-daytime programs. Most are set in the general present, and take place in an urban-suburban setting in the United States.

Differences that are found, however, exist primarily for programs in which mental illness appears, particularly when mental illness is a significant or major focus of the plot. Briefly, these programs are most likely to be action programs and be serious. Moreover, about 30 percent of these programs are feature films.

Overall major characters in prime-time and weekend-daytime network television dramatic programs are basically healthy and hardy. Nevertheless, the average viewer, one who watches one of the three networks about three hours each evening, sees about 5 physically ill or injured persons, about 2 people who are mentally ill, and 1 physically handicapped person, each week. Physical illness or injury, mental illness, and physical handicaps are practically invisible in children's programming -- the child who watches television each weekend-morning will see 1 physically ill or injured person each weekend, but will have to watch about 5 weekend-mornings to see a mentally ill person and about 2 and a half weekend-mornings to see a physically handicapped character.

Over the 11 years (13 week-long samples) we have monitored trends in television content, the average number of characters who are physically ill or injured and need treatment, mentally ill or physically handicapped has been fairly constant. Although physically ill or injured characters have ranged from a low of 3.6 percent in 1971 to a high of 14.7 percent in 1978, on the average, 6 to 7 percent of the major characters have been portrayed as physically ill or with an injury requiring treatment each year. About 3 percent of the major characters have been portrayed as mentally ill, and about 2 percent in each sample have been physically handicapped.

In children's programs we find the same basic stability in regard to presentation. Again physical illness and injury requiring treatment show the most fluctuation -- ranging from less than 1 percent in 1977 to 9 percent in 1970, with an average of 3 percent. Mentally ill and handicapped either do not appear at all or appear very infrequently.

When we compare major characters who are physically ill or injured, mentally ill and/or physically handicapped to the "typical" major character we find several interesting differences.

Physically ill or injured characters (males and females) differ only slightly from the typical character in a major role in prime-time programming -- they tend to be men, in the prime of life, and are, for the most part, presented in a fairly favorable light. The only area in which the physically ill appear to be somewhat different is in the area of marital status and romantic involvement. In this case, about half of the physically ill -- both men and women -- are portrayed as married. Moreover, a greater proportion of the physically ill men and women are portrayed as being involved in a romantic relationship.

Mentally ill characters are, however, presented quite differently and the differences are especially pronounced for men and women. Mentally ill major characters are less likely than other characters to be non-whites -- only 1.3 percent of mentally ill characters are non-whites (the typical racial distribution is about 90 percent white and 9 percent non-white). Moreover, all of the mentally ill non-white characters are males.

Mentally ill characters, especially mentally ill women, are also somewhat younger than most major characters. In the entire major character population, about 19 percent of the men and 29 percent of the women are categorized as young adults. Among the mentally ill major characters, however, 30 percent of the men and 56 percent of the women are categorized as young adults. It must be remembered, however, that since there are not many mentally ill characters all of these results must be viewed very cautiously. Mentally ill women also differ from their "normal" counterparts, in that almost two out of ten are wealthy or are categorized as

"upper class."

The mentally ill major characters also differ from "normal" characters on a number of evaluative variables. Thus we find that mentally ill men, in prime-time programs are more likely to be portrayed as "bad"; both mentally ill men and especially the women are presented as unsuccessful; and, both mentally ill men and women are more likely than other characters to be involved in violence. Only a quarter of mentally ill characters do not commit violence and only one in five are not victimized. This is very different from the entire major character population in which almost three out of five characters do not commit violence and more than half are not victimized.

Finally, physically handicapped major characters are somewhat, but not extremely different, from most major characters. Unlike the mentally ill, and the "normals" there are more non-white characters among the physically handicapped -- about 14 percent of the handicapped men and 9 percent of handicapped women are categorized as non-whites. The physically handicapped are also likely to be a little older than most characters. But, this finding must be viewed extremely cautiously because of both the small number of older characters and the small number of physically handicapped characters.

The physically handicapped major characters also differ on the evaluative variables, although they are not as negatively portrayed as the mentally ill. The physically handicapped and, especially the men, are likely to be presented as "bad"; a greater proportion of these men and women are presented as unsuccessful, and more are likely to be victimized. The physically handicapped are, however, about as likely as most major characters to be portrayed as committing the violence.

Another important aspect of the portrayal of health and health-related issues in television drama is the presentation of those who are in the business of curing illness; that is, doctors, nurses, and paramedics. Doctors, nurses, medicine and medically-related themes have always been important in television drama and for a number of years there were a fairly large number of medical programs. Moreover, there is still at least one such program per season. Doctors and nurses have thus been rather visible occupational roles in television drama -- overall, in the 7 years that we have coded specific occupations of characters, we have found that doctors make up 5 percent and nurses about 1 percent of the prime-time adult major character population while doctors make up 4 percent and nurses 2 percent of the entire characters population (major and minor characters). Thus, in prime time, our average viewer would see about 12 doctors and 6 nurses (three doctors and one nurse in a major role) in an average week of viewing.

Paramedics are, however, much less visible -- our viewer would have to watch for 2 weeks to see one and for almost a month to see one in a major role.

Medical occupational roles are much less visible in children's programings -- in these 7 years of weekend-daytime dramatic programs only .6 percent of the major character population and .7 percent of the entire characters population were doctors, no major characters were nurses and only .2 percent in the entire population were nurses. Thus to translate to what our "average" child viewer might see on an average weekend, he/she would have to watch about 2 weeks to see any doctor and about 5 weeks to see a nurse. To see these characters in a major role our child would have to watch about ten weeks to see a doctor and would never see a nurse in a

major role.

Since those in medical occupational roles are practically invisible in children's programming, the rest of this discussion will focus upon prime-time programming.

As in our society, the occupational roles of doctor and nurse are very sex specific -- doctors are most likely to be men and nurses are women. Paramedics are also likely to be men, and due to the very small number of characters in these roles, this discussion will also not focus upon them.

Doctors and nurses as well as most professionals in major roles are rarely members of minority racial groups -- only 2.4 percent of the doctors and 5 percent of the nurses are non-white characters. Among all doctors and nurses (those in minor as well as major roles) minority racial groups are better represented -- about 8.3 percent of the doctors and 10 percent of the nurses are non-whites.

Doctors and nurses differ from other professionals and other characters in a number of other areas. Although doctors are more likely but nurses are less likely than other professionals to be portrayed as married, nurses and other professionals are more likely to be presented as involved in romantic relationships.

Doctors are also much more likely than other characters and especially other professionals to be portrayed in a positive way. They are much more likely to be presented as "good" and as successful. A full three-quarters of the doctors are categorized as "good" and over half are successful. Nurses do not, however, receive the same overwhelming positive treatment, although they are not especially treated in a negative way. Nurses are presented much like other professionals and the "typical" prime-time major characters. Both doctors and nurses, are however, much less likely than

other professionals and the "typical" prime-time characters to be involved in violence. More than 4 out of 5 do not commit violence and more than three quarters are not victimized.

Overall doctors and nurses do not differ too very much from the typical character and other professionals on the personality trait scales. Doctors are, however, a bit more fair, sociable and warm than most characters. Doctors are also smarter, more rational, stable and fair than nurses. Finally, both doctors and nurses tend to be more peaceful than other professionals and all characters.