Marital Status in TV Drama: A Case of Reduced Options

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Over the past 30 years, television has come to play an increasingly important role in our society. It is, in essence, the wholesale distributor of images and serves as the mainstream of our popular culture. It is "on" in the average home for over six hours each day. Unlike newspapers, magazines, and films, television presents a world that most people experience in a largely non-selective manner. It is, in brief, our nation's most common, constant, and vivid learning environment. While television is only one of many factors which may influence people, it may well be the single most common and pervasive source of certain sex-related conceptions and actions for large segments of the population.

From the earliest days of research on television content, marriage and the family have consistently appeared as important themes.[1] Two independent studies of television programming of the early 1950's found similar basic dimensions of content and that home and family were important and dominant program themes.[2] Studies about daytime serials have found that these programs deal almost exclusively with home and family. For example, Katzman's analysis of conversations in television serials revealed that love and the home were the predominant themes in 32.8 percent of all recorded conversations.[3] Content studies focusing upon the presentation of women on television have consistently revealed that women are usually presented in a home, family, or marital context.

A study of women in television programs designed for children and/or focusing upon family life found that most females are portrayed as either

wives or mothers and that married female characters are not otherwise employed.[4] Moreover, most women in children's shows are home-oriented and concerned with physical appearances: they are responsible for all cooking and cleaning, while authority is relegated to male characters. Hashell examined five episodes of each of 13 series in which women were the principal characters (e.g., "Alice," "One Day at a Time," "Charlie's Angels") and found that even though the women in this specially focused sample held jobs and supported households without male assistance, most of the topics they discussed were "traditionally female," dealing with romance, personal appearances, dating, and divorce.[5]

Information about the portrayal of marriage in prime-time dramatic television programming comes from a study by Manes and Melynk.[6] This analysis revealed that full-time housewives had more successful marriages than working wives, and that working women, as compared to working men, were more likely not to be married. Moreover, the few successfully married and working women often were not independent or "true" workers; they appeared to be ready to quit their jobs or were willing to work for their husbands.

A major study of prime-time network family series aired between 1947 and 1977 found that 90 percent of these programs were situation comedies and that more than half of all the heads of television households had middle-class occupations.[7] For example, 43 percent of heads of households in television family drama were professionals. In contrast, professionals make up only 14 percent of the U.S. labor force. These authors also note that the working class was especially underrepresented in these family-related series (6 percent of all family series) and were often presented in a negative fashion. No working class characters appeared in family series aired between

1966 and 1977. These authors noted two recurrent themes.[8] First, (predominant in family series aired between 1949 and 1966), the working class husband-father was often portrayed as a bumbling fool. Second (dominant since 1971) the children in these series were upwardly mobile. Thus, in these shows the working class family was presented with dignity when upwardly mobile -- dignity was attached to becoming middle class.

Methodology

This research was conducted as part of Cultural Indicators, an ongoing research project that has been examining trends in television content and conceptions of social reality since 1967-68.[9] This paradigm consists of two interrelated parts: (1) message system analysis -- the annual content analysis of prime-time and weekend-daytime network television drama and (2) cultivation analysis -- determining the conceptions of social reality that television viewing tends to cultivate in different groups of viewers.[10]

This study focuses upon the portrayal of marriage, home, and family in prime-time network television dramatic programs. It uses data that isolate the gross, unambiguous, and commonly understood patterns of portrayal; these data do not reflect what any particular individual viewer might see on any given evening but rather what large communities absorb over long periods of time.

This analysis describes married, formerly married, and unmarried major characters.[11] It uses data collected for adult (over 16 years old) major characters (those who play roles essential to the plot) in week-long samples of prime-time network dramatic programs aired between 1975 and 1979.[12] The content items are demographic and descriptive variables that meet acceptable standards of reliability.[13]

Findings

Content studies have consistently revealed that the prime-time television world is a fairly stereotyped and traditional world. Women have been consistently underrepresented -- for the past eleven years they have been outnumbered by three to one. Thus, for each woman cast in a major role, three men are similarly cast. Consequently, female characters are less important, play fewer different types of roles, and many are concentrated in roles that can be best described as "typically female."

When women do appear, however, they usually are younger than the men, are more attractive and nurturing, are quite often portrayed in the context of home and family, and likely to be married. Women who are employed (not usually those who are also married) are cast in traditionally female occupations -- nurses, secretaries, waitresses, and sometimes teachers. Men, on the other hand, are generally portrayed as older, more powerful and potent, and proportionately fewer are married. More men are employed and they usually work in high prestige and traditionally masculine occupations (doctors, lawyers, policemen, and other professionally-oriented jobs). Finally, a considerable portion of the female character population is found in programs where major themes center around home and family.[14]

Notions of marriage, home, family and romance are important aspects of the way characters are portrayed and tend to be much more developed in female characters. Thus, the proportion of female characters who cannot be categorized as either married or not married is considerably smaller than the corresponding proportion of male characters. On prime-time network dramatic programs aired between 1975 and 1979 (see Table 1), only 12 percent of the females could not be coded on marital status; 44.3 percent are classified as not married, 33.2 percent are married, and 8.2 percent are divorced,

separated, or widowed. These are five year figures, but the year-to-year differences are slight if not non-existent.

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Table 1 about here
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Similar differences exist for the proportion of men and women within each marital status classification. Since the marital status of very few women is unknown it is not surprising that 86.8 percent of the cannot code group are men and only 13.2 percent are women. The male-female distribution is almost the same for married and unmarried characters -- almost a one-third to two-thirds split. The proportion of women increases in the formerly married category: women make up 44.9 percent of this group.

Table 2 reveals that sex, race, and marital status are even more interwoven. While information about marital status is not available for more than a third of the white males, this information is missing for only 17.6 percent of the non-white males. Consequently, more non-white than white males are either married or explicitly not married. Close to the same percent of white and non-white males are in the formerly married classification.

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Table 2 about here
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Among female characters, the relationship between race and marital status takes on an entirely different form. White women are much more likely not to be married than non-white women. Almost half of the white women are presented as not married, while only 22.9 percent of the non-white women fall in this category. Married women include only 30.8 percent of the white women but 57.1 percent of the non-white women. Finally,

slightly more white than non-white women are widowed, divorced, or separated.

Age is another very important aspect of characterization and is classified in two ways -- an estimation of a character's chronological age and their social age. Social age is a descriptive variable that classified characters in the following age-related roles: children-adolescents, young adults (those with few responsibilities or just beginning a career), settled adults (characters in the prime years of life, settled in careers, with families, etc.), and older adults (those past the prime years of life and portrayed as "old").

The relationship between age and marital status reflects some very predictable differences. For example, most characters who are not married are young adults -- more than one third of the males and almost half of the women. Most of the married and practically all of the formerly married and/or mixed marital status characters are settled or older adults. In regard to chronological age, in most roles female characters are younger than their male counterparts. Married characters, however, tend to be older than unmarried characters and formerly married characters (because many are widowed) are generally the oldest group.

When we examine the relationship between marriage and age we find that young adults are the least likely group to be married -- about 8 out of 10 of both young men and young women are not married. Differences among settled adults are also sex-related. Most male characters are found in three marital status categories: there is no information for 36.5 percent of the males and about the same proportion (a little more than a quarter) are not married as are married. The formerly married make up 12.6 percent of the middle-aged women and 5.7 percent of middle-aged men. Both older men and older women are the groups of characters who are most likely to be cast in

a married role -- 47.6 percent of these men and 44.4 percent of the women. Finally, more than 10 percent of both older men and older women are cast as formerly married.

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Table 3 about here
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Romantic involvement in prime time tells a similar story. In short, more female than male characters are involved in some romantic situation or behavior and about half of the young adults and settled adults are also so categorized. But, among the elderly, romance is practically non-existent; in these seven annual weekly samples, only four of these characters -- three men and one woman -- are presented as having a romantic relationship.

We also find that, in general, romance, home, family, and marriage are linked. Married characters are often involved in romantic relationships -- 62.7 percent of married men and 73.8 percent of married women. In contrast, among characters who are not married, only 38.4 percent of the men and 46.4 percent of the women are involved romantically; and among the formerly married, only a quarter of both men and women are so involved.

Marital status is also related to other aspects of the portrayal of home and family. For example, family life is more likely to be important to married characters and married characters are also likely to either have or care for children. The group of characters most likely to be portrayed as having children are formerly married men.

The relationship between marital status and employment in prime time (see Table 4) is especially important. First, many major characters -- over one quarter of the women and 10 percent of the men -- do not have jobs. These characters are not presented as unemployed; rather, an occupational

role is not part of their characterization. About three-quarters of male adult characters and a little more than half of the female adult characters are portrayed in an occupation while the remaining characters are housewives, criminals, retired, and in other non-employment positions.

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Table 4 about here
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Among women occupational status is usually associated with marital status. Among all adult characters, married women are the least likely group to be portrayed as employed -- only 28.6 percent of married women have a specific occupational role. This is very different from our society where about half of all women who are married, and living with their husbands, have jobs. Women in prime time who are not married, however, are often employed -- 60.6 percent of the unmarried women, 61.3 percent of the formerly married women, and 75 percent of the mixed group. For male characters, marital status is not related to employment status; most males are employed and the group with the smallest proportion of non-employed characters (still seven out of ten) are unmarried.

Discussion

The results of all these analyses are remarkably similar and offer little more than a rather stereotypical and traditional portrayal of marriage. The picture that emerges is that home and family, marriage and romance are important themes in the media and are usually presented as the domain of the female. Marital status clearly differentiates female characters. Married women are often presented in the most stereotyped and traditional ways -- they have children, perform homemaking tasks, are

involved romantically, are not involved in violence, and usually do not have an outside job. Moreover, our analysis of personality traits reveals that these women are feminine, peaceful, fairly happy, attractive, smart, and warm. Unmarried women are also portrayed somewhat traditionally. As would be expected they are younger, do not have or care for children, family life is not presented as part of their characterization, they are likely to be employed, and they are a little more likely to be involved in violence. Moreover, the personality trait analysis revealed that these women are quite attractive, sociable, warm, smart, and feminine. Surprisingly, more non-white women than white women are married while proportionately more white than non-white women are not married.

Formerly married women are presented less traditionally but seem to fare the least well of the women. They are older, they have jobs, they have and/or care for children, perform homemaking activities for others, are not often involved in a romantic relationship, and while many feel that family life is important they are significantly less likely than married women to feel this way. Moreover, the personality traits of the formerly married woman reveal that she is less attractive, somewhat unhappy, a little selfish, and much less feminine than the other women who populate prime-time drama.

Married and formerly married men, on the other hand, do not differ as much. Formerly married male characters are, however, considerably less masculine than other men and are also older and a little unhappy. They are very likely to have children and family life is important to them. Men who are not married are very unlikely to be portrayed positively in regard to home and family -- naturally, they do not have children, they do not play roles indicating that family life is important, many are not involved romantically (although more of the unmarried than the formerly married are so

involved). Finally, these men are rated as younger, attractive, sociable, strong, smart, and masculine.

Although these images seem to idealize the unmarried state -- characters who are not married are portrayed the most positively and with the least conflict -- they have jobs, are more powerful, and appear in a wider variety of settings, television also seems to foster the notion (especially for women) that marriage is benign, secure, and safe. But married women have considerably reduced options and rarely have a life away from the family -- they rarely are presented as able to mix marriage and other activities such as succeeding in a job. The formerly married woman seems to have it all -- she has a job and a family -- but she pays the price by being less feminine, attractive, sociable, selfish, and unhappy. These conflicts are almost never part of male characterizations -- males are both married and employed and seem to succeed in both. One negative aspect of male portrayals, however, is that married men are somewhat more likely to be portrayed as less important and powerful than their unmarried counterparts.

In a word, these images reflect an ambivalence about the "appropriate" roles and options for women in our society. And findings from our longitudinal study of a three year panel of over 200 adolescents in rural-suburban New Jersey[15] provide evidence that television may cultivate conflicts that reflect this ambivalence. For example, Morgan and Harr-Mazer[16] and Morgan[17] have found that television cultivates such outlooks as "families are good," "single is bad," and "families are large," as well as higher career aspirations and expectations.

In brief, these analyses reveal that adolescents who watch more television are more likely to be eager to get married and have children at a relatively early age, as well as to express the desire to have more children.

More importantly, longitudinal examination of these data reveals that early television viewing has a significant independent influence upon later family expectations, above and beyond the effects of earlier family expectations. This strengthens the possibility of making a causal inference; amount of viewing in early adolescence significantly relates to that part of family expectations in later adolescence which is not explained by early plans, and thus influences "new information" or change in family plans.

Television seems to cultivate attitudes about when to form a family and how many children to have. But we need to know more about the portrayal of family relationships, both in terms of the nature of interactions within the family and the nature and scope of the functions served by family members. In addition, we need to understand the role television may play in cultivating images and expectations regarding continuities and disruptions in family life for other age groups. Beyond its influence on adolescents, the representation of family behaviors on television may contribute to adults' conceptions, both as they form families and as their children grow up.

Footnotes

[1] See Greenberg, Bradley S., "Television and Role Socialization." National Institute of Mental Health, Television and Social Behavior Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the 80's, in press; George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, "Media and the Family: Images and Impact," paper for the National Research Forum on Family Issues, White House Conference on Families, Washington, D.C., April 10-11, 1980; and Linda Busby, "Sex-role Research in the Mass Media." Journal of Communication, 1975, 25:2, 107-131.

[2] Dallas W. Smythe, "Reality as Presented on Television." Public Opinion Quarterly, 1954, 18, 156 and Sidney Head, "Content Analysis of Television Drama Programs." Quarterly of Film, Radio and TV, 1954, 9, 175-194.

[3] Natan Katzman, "Television Soap Operas: What's Been Going On Anyway?" Public Opinion Quarterly, 1972, 32, 200-213.

[4] M.J. Long and R.J. Simon, "The Roles and Statuses of Women on Children and Family TV Programs." Journalism Quarterly, 1974, 51, 107-110.

[5] D. Hashell, "The Depiction of Women in Leading Roles in Prime-Time Television." Journal of Broadcasting, 1979, 23, 191-196.

[6] A.L. Manes and P. Melynk, "Televised Models of Female Achievement." Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 1974, 4, 365-374.

[7] R. Butsch and L.M. Glennon, "The Portrayal of Social Class in Television Family Series, 1947-1977," 1978, unpublished manuscript.

[8] L.M. Glennon and R.J. Butsch, "The Devaluation of Working Class Lifestyle in Television Family Series, 1947-1977," 1978, unpublished research report.

[9] George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, "The Mainstreaming of America: Violence Profile No. 11." Journal of Communication, 1980, 30:3, 10-29; George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Marilyn Jackson-Beeck, Suzanne Jeffries-Fox, and Nancy Signorielli, "Cultural Indicators: Violence Profile No. 9." Journal of Communication, 1978, 28:3, 176-207.

[10] This research and reports have focused upon many different topics including violence and power (George Gerbner, et al., "The Mainstreaming of America," op. cit.), images of aging (George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Nancy Signorielli, and Michael Morgan, "Aging with Television: Images on Television Drama and Conceptions of Social Reality." Journal of Communication, 1980, 30:1, 37-47.), sex-role and occupational portrayals (George Gerbner and Nancy Signorielli, "Women and Minorities in Television Drama: 1969-1978." The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1979; Nancy Signorielli, "The Valuation of Occupations on Television." paper presented at Public Views of Doctors and Lawyers, a National Invitational Conference, The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, October 18-19, 1979.).

[11] Each character's marital status is coded into one of five categories: cannot code (the story does not provide sufficient information about marital status), not married (includes characters who co-habitate with a member of the opposite sex but do not plan to marry), married characters (includes those who are presently married, get married, or plan to be

married), the formerly married (includes widowed, divorced, separated), and mixed (characters who fall in more than one of these categories).

[12] A complete description of this methodology, including reliability measures, may be found in George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, "Violence Profile No. 11: Trends in Network Television Drama and Viewer Conceptions of Social Reality, 1967-1979." The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1980. and George Gerbner, et al., "The Mainstreaming of America," op. cit.

[13] The assessment of reliability consists of the calculation of an agreement coefficient for each content item. Five computational formulae are used; their variations depend upon the scale type of the particular variable being analyzed. For the derivation of the formulae and a discussion of their properties, see Klaus Krippendorff, "Bivariate Agreement Coefficients for the Reliability of Data," in E.F. Borgatta, ed., Sociological Methodology: 1970, San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 1970 and Klaus Krippendorff, Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology, Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980. These coefficients range from +1.00 to -1.00, where +1.00 indicates perfect agreement and .00 is agreement due solely to chance. A coefficient of .50 indicates that performance is 50 percent above the level expected by chance. Acceptable levels of reliability are defined as follows: items with agreement coefficients of .8 or above are considered as unconditionally reliable, items with coefficients between .6 and .8 are accepted conditionally, while items whose coefficients fall between .5 and .6 are used with extreme caution. All items used in this analysis meet these standards.

[14] Overall, the notions of home and family, as well as close personal relationships between the sexes, are two of the most frequently appearing themes in prime-time network dramatic programming. Only crime and violence appear as consistently. A special analysis of Cultural Indicators message system analysis program data archives reveals that these two themes have been among the top three in prime time every year since 1969 (except for 1976 when home and family was fifth). Moreover, over the past eleven years, these themes have appeared in eighty percent of all prime-time programs (George Gerbner, et al., "Media and the Family," op. cit.).

[15] The basic theoretical framework for cultivation analysis is described in George Gerbner, et al., "Cultural Indicators," op. cit. and George Gerbner, et al., "The Mainstreaming of America," op. cit. The New Jersey longitudinal study is described in Larry Gross and Michael Morgan, "Television and Enculturation." in J.R. Dominick and J. Fletcher (eds.), Broadcasting Research Methods: A Reader. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, in press.

[16] Michael Morgan and Heather Harr-Mazer, "Television and Adolescents' Family Life Expectations." Manuscript, The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1980.

[17] Michael Morgan, "Television and Adolescent Role Socialization." paper presented at the XXX Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Acapulco, Mexico, 1980.

Table 1

Marital Status of Adult Major Characters
(Prime Time, 1975-1979)

	All		Male			Female		
	N	%	N	Col.%	Row %	N	Col.%	Row %
Total	1286	100.0	907	100.0	(70.5)	379	100.0	(29.5)
Marital Status								
Cannot Code	348	27.0	302	33.3	86.8	46	12.2	13.2
Not Married	501	39.0	333	36.7	66.5	168	44.3	33.5
Married	351	27.3	225	24.8	64.1	126	33.2	35.9
Formerly Married	69	5.4	38	4.2	55.1	31	8.2	44.9
Mixed	17	1.3	9	1.0	52.9	8	2.1	47.1

Table 2

Marital Status of White and
Non-White Adult Major Characters, by Sex
(Prime Time, 1975-1979)

	White			Non-White		
	N	Col.%	Row %	N	Col.%	Row %
All	1165	100.0	90.6	120	100.0	9.3
Cannot Code	327	28.1	94.0	20	16.7	5.7
Not Married	456	39.1	91.0	45	37.5	9.0
Married	302	25.9	86.0	49	40.8	14.0
Formerly Married	63	5.4	91.3	6	5.0	8.7
Mixed	17	1.5	100.0	0	0.0	0.0
Males	821	100.0	90.5	85	100.0	9.4
Cannot Code	286	34.8	94.7	15	17.6	5.0
Not Married	296	36.1	88.9	37	43.5	11.1
Married	196	23.9	87.1	29	34.1	12.9
Formerly Married	34	4.1	89.5	4	4.7	10.5
Mixed	9	1.1	100.0	0	0.0	0.0
Females	344	100.0	90.8	35	100.0	9.2
Cannot Code	41	11.9	89.1	5	14.3	10.9
Not Married	160	46.5	95.2	8	22.9	4.8
Married	106	30.8	84.1	20	57.1	15.9
Formerly Married	29	8.4	93.5	2	5.7	6.5
Mixed	8	2.3	100.0	0	0.0	0.0

Table 3

Marital Status of Adult Major Characters
in Three Social Age Categories
(Prime Time, 1975-1979)

	All		Male		Female	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Young Adult	255	100.0	157	100.0	98	100.0
Cannot Code	28	11.0	21	13.4	7	7.1
Not Married	206	80.8	126	80.3	80	81.6
Married	19	7.5	9	5.7	10	10.2
Formerly Married	1	0.4	0	0.0	1	1.0
Mixed	1	0.4	1	0.6	0	0.0
Settled Adult	976	100.0	712	100.0	264	100.0
Cannot Code	311	31.9	272	38.2	39	14.8
Not Married	269	27.6	192	27.0	77	29.2
Married	316	32.4	205	28.8	111	42.0
Formerly Married	64	6.6	35	4.9	29	11.0
Mixed	16	1.6	8	1.1	8	3.0
Elderly	33	100.0	23	100.0	10	100.0
Cannot Code	7	21.2	7	30.4	0	0.0
Not Married	6	18.2	2	8.7	4	40.0
Married	16	48.5	11	47.8	5	50.0
Formerly Married	4	12.1	3	13.0	1	10.0
Mixed	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

Table 4

Employment and Marital Status of
Adult Major Characters, by Sex
1975-1979

	Cannot Code		Not Married		Married		Formerly		Mixed		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Major Characters	348	100.0	501	100.0	351	100.0	69	100.0	17	100.0	1286	100.0
Unknown	14	4.0	80	16.0	86	24.5	10	14.5	1	5.9	191	14.9
Unemployed	45	12.9	81	16.2	31	8.8	6	8.7	1	5.9	164	12.8
Housewife	0	0.0	4	0.8	29	8.3	3	4.3	0	0.0	36	2.8
Employed	289	83.0	336	67.1	205	58.4	50	72.5	15	88.2	895	69.6
Males	302	100.0	333	100.0	225	100.0	38	100.0	9	100.0	907	100.0
Unknown	10	3.3	43	12.9	34	15.1	3	7.9	0	0.0	90	9.9
Unemployed	41	13.6	55	16.5	22	9.8	4	10.5	0	0.0	122	13.5
Housewife	0	0.0	1	0.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.1
Employed	251	83.1	234	70.3	169	75.1	31	81.6	9	100.0	694	76.5
Females	46	100.0	168	100.0	126	100.0	31	100.0	8	100.0	379	100.0
Unknown	4	8.7	37	22.0	52	41.3	7	22.6	1	12.5	101	26.6
Unemployed	4	8.7	26	15.5	9	7.1	2	6.5	1	12.5	42	11.1
Housewife	0	0.0	3	1.8	29	23.0	3	9.7	0	0.0	35	9.2
Employed	38	82.6	102	60.7	36	28.6	19	61.3	6	75.0	201	53.0