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# THE IMAGE OF THE ELDERLY IN PRIME-TIME TELEVISION DRAMA<sup>1</sup>

by Nancy Signorielli and George Gerbner

To the extent that old age is a role learned by living in a culture, what is television's contribution to learning that role? Homo Sapiens becomes a particular kind of human being through his use of symbols. Social regularities in human behavior cannot be understood in isolation from cultural regularities in the symbolic environment. And when the symbolic environment itself is changing, the quality of social health and behavior can best be assessed if we know which way the cultural tides flow.

The basic assumption underlying the research we call Cultural Indicators<sup>2</sup> is that television drama is in the mainstream — or is *the* mainstream — of the symbolic environment which cultivates the most widely shared conceptions of life, society, and the world. No member of society is unaffected by its dominant cultural trends. Television drama offers viewers a continuous stream of "facts" and impressions about the ways of the world, the constancies and vagaries of "human nature", and the consequences of actions.

This discussion of how the elderly are portrayed in prime-time network television drama is based upon the analysis of a number of content items from the Cultural Indicators Message System Analysis 1969-1976 Data Archive for Major Characters.

This analysis isolates elderly characters through a content item entitled Social Age. This item consists of four age-related classifications — (1) children and adolescents, (2) young adults, (3) settled adults (characters who have steady employment, a family,

etc.), and (4) elderly. It also has a "cannot classify" category to cover those characters whose social age could not be determined. This discussion focuses upon the comparison of the three adult age categories; that is, it looks at how the elderly are portrayed in relation to young adults and settled adults.

## Profile of TV Characters

The elderly are a very small segment (3.8 percent) of the major character population. Children and adolescents are also a small group (5 percent); most characters are young adults (23 percent) or settled adults (67.9 percent).

The distribution of all male and all female characters in the four Social Age categories is somewhat similar. However, a greater percentage of women are classified as young adults (30 percent of the women and 20 percent of the men are young adults) while more men than women are categorized as settled adults (71 percent of the men as compared to 60 percent of the women). About the same percentage of men and women are classified as elderly.

Most television characters are white; overall, only 10 percent of the character population is classified as non-white. However, more of the elderly are likely to be non-white (17 percent) than settled adults (8 percent); non-whites make up 13 percent of the young adult group.

Over 85 percent of television characters are categorized as middle class. However, class status tends to increase with age. The elderly have the greatest proportion of their group (18.6 percent) categorized as belonging to the upper class.

More of the elderly than any of the other adult age groups are married (about 67 percent), have children, and are coded positively on the family life item, that is, family life is important to them. However, none of the elderly women and only two of the elderly men in this sample are involved in a romantic relationship.

The analysis of the personality trait profiles of each age group revealed that elderly characters are rated less positively than young adults or settled adults. They are the only group not rated as attractive; but they are rated as being sociable, warm, peaceful, fair, and supportive. The elderly are also rated as the least happy (actually somewhat unhappy) of these groups of characters.

## "Good" Roles, "Bad" Roles

Two important content items — "good" — "bad" and "success" focus upon the type of role that a character portrays. Overall, more than half of the major character population in prime-time programs are classified as "good." However, fewer of the elderly are so portrayed.

Close to 60 percent of young adults and settled adults are classified as "good," while less than 50 percent of the elderly are so categorized. Moreover, the percent classified as "bad" is the same for elderly and settled adult characters — 14 percent. More than one-third of the elderly are portrayed as both "good" and "bad."

In regard to "success," fewer of the elderly, especially elderly women, are coded as "successful." Proportionately more elderly women are classified as "unsuc-

cessful" than any other age-related group (almost 30 percent). About 19 percent of men in both the elderly and settled adult groups are classified as "unsuccessful". Finally, the elderly, more than any other adult age group, portray roles that are somewhat comic, and vice-versa, fewer of the elderly portray serious roles.

### Violence and the Elderly Character

Among all characters, the elderly are the least likely group to either commit violence or be victimized. If they are victimized, the elderly are more likely (than any other age group) to be killed; however, they are less likely to be just hurt.

Sex and age roles and violence are related in an interesting way. With increasing age, the male's risk of general victimization declines. Old men are the only age-

related group who are most likely to commit violence than be victimized. Young boys get hurt a lot and old men do a lot of hurting. This contest favors elderly men until it becomes lethal — then, the elderly males become one of the groups more likely to be killed than to kill others.

For women, increasing age means increasing risks of both being hurt and being killed. Old women, unlike old men, are more likely to get hurt than hurt others. When old women are cast in roles that involve killing, the role calls for them to get killed but never to kill.

In conclusion, the overall image of the elderly in this sample of prime-time, network dramatic television programs is quite negative. The lessons of television are thus implicit in these findings.

that the journal would be a welcome addition to every college special education program, continuing education program and special areas as well as to administrators concerned with the aged field.

I share with you a deep concern for the aged in our midst and I wish you continued success with *Generations*.

Sincerely,  
Alfred L. Moye  
Deputy Commissioner for  
Higher and Continuing Education  
DHEW

Dear Editor:

May I commend you on including that excellent and timely article under "Commentary" called *Can You Build A Bridge?* in your summer issue. I would hope that this might be the beginning of some fruitful and badly needed dialogue between professionals and seniors, perhaps encouraged by the use of your publication as a forum.

The California Commission on Aging, as one example, was very interested in the article, and I am sure that other groups comprised primarily of (non-paid) older persons will respond to it as well. It is much better to get these dis-

### Footnotes

1. This report is based upon research being conducted under Administration on Aging Grant No. 90-A-1299, "Aging with Television".
2. Cultural Indicators research began with the investigation of violence in network television drama in 1967-68 for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. It continued under the sponsorship of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee in Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the American Medical Association. A description of this research may be found in 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, pp. 176-207.

*Nancy Signorielli is a Research Associate with the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania.*

*George Gerbner is the Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania.*

reements out in the open than to cover them up.

Thank you for this article as well as for a generally excellent publication.

Tish Sommers, President—  
Older Women's League  
3800 Harrison St.  
Oakland, CA 94611

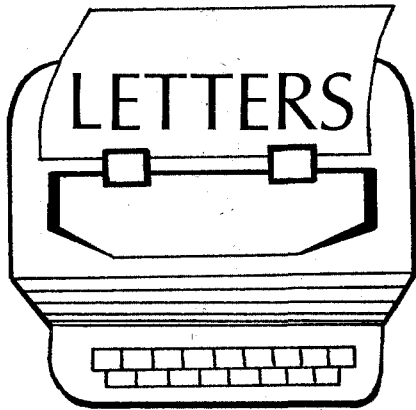
Dear Editor:

In your recent issue of *Generations* on education (Summer 78) you included under "Commentary" an excellent statement which has been of concern to many of us for a long, long time. Where can the talents of our older persons be put to better use than in senior programs, yet who will place us?

I would like to suggest that you incorporate a column as a sequel to this commentary where older persons can tell their tales of having been by-passed in lucrative work with and for other older persons. Let us hammer away at the issue with specific examples.

Of course you know (I hope) that I, the advocate par excellence, appreciate your work and watch with delight the progress you all are involved with.

Marguerite E. Schwarzman  
1855 Lyndon Road  
San Diego, CA 92103



Dear Editor:

I would like to thank you for the copy of your publication, *Generations*. In reviewing the special issue on education I found it to be varied, timely, readable and capable of encompassing a wide range of audiences. Two of the articles, "Peer Teaching Encounters Wide Disparity in Goals" and "Education Has Become a Moveable Feat," were of particular interest as the projects described are supported by our Community Service and Continuing Education Branch.

Several staff members with whom I shared the publication indicated