

Wonder Women: The Portrayal of Women in Television Soap Operas

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This study used content analysis to explore the depiction of women in soap operas aired during the fall of 2000. The marital status, employment, and age of female characters were compared to male characters, as well as to the general population. The portrayal of single motherhood was also examined for work-life conflict, family support, and socioeconomic status. Findings supported the hypotheses that women in soap operas would be young, single, upper-class professionals. Very few characters were single mothers, and those characters who were experienced little work-life conflict. Although the depiction of women did not differ significantly from that of men, it did vary from the general population. This skewed portrayal could lead women to feel misrepresented or to become dissatisfied with their lives.

HOW ARE NIKKI NEWMAN, ERICA KANE, Christine Williams, and Brooke Logan all interrelated? These women are the reigning divas of daytime television (TV). What do they all have in common? They are young, beautiful, and successful—often against all odds. Many have endured painful divorces, single parenthood, and abuse, yet still manage to remain on top in their lives. These characters seem to have it all.

This superhuman portrayal of women, however, can become problematic for the audience. TV is becoming increasingly important in society, with more than 90% of households owning a TV and the majority having more than one (Davis, 1990). TV is watched an average of 20 hours per week and is cited as the third most time-consuming activity, after work and sleep (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). With its increasing popularity, the key role TV assumes is that of socialization agent—TV teaches us values, behaviors, and even sex roles (Davis, 1990). Cultivation theory, developed in 1980 by Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, attempts to explain the relation between TV content and the viewer's conception of reality (as cited in Morgan, 1982). This theory hypothesizes that the more time people spend watching TV, the more likely they are to possess worldviews that match the

views presented on TV. These findings have been replicated in numerous studies (e.g., Rubin, 1985; Signorielli, 1989). In the 1980s, Gerbner et al. (1980) expanded cultivation theory to include the notion of *mainstreaming*, or reducing individual differences among heavy viewers and creating a homogenized outlook (as cited in Morgan, 1982). TV provides a broad, unified view of the world, and the more viewers watch, the more likely they are to adopt this view, thus reducing individual differences among viewers. Morgan (1982) compared the results of a sex role stereotype questionnaire administered to male and female students three times over the course of three years. Morgan found that the more TV girls watched, the more sexist they tended to be. This same finding did not hold true for boys. Therefore, he concluded that outliers, viewers not well represented by those writing and controlling media sources (specifically

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girls), are particularly at risk due to a convergence and homogenization of viewers.

Why are girls more at risk than the rest of the viewing audience? Morgan (1982) contends that girls are less likely to possess a worldview that matches TV's reality; thus, they are at higher risk to be mainstreamed, that is, to hold the viewpoint of the majority of viewers. Unfortunately, this television viewpoint is not necessarily accurate. Much research has explored the content of TV shows and their evolution over time. The analyses have been overwhelmingly disappointing—TV still portrays the sexes unequally. Women are portrayed as younger than men, although this statistic is not true in the population at large (Beck, 1978; Davis, 1990; Gerbner & Signorielli, 1982). Furthermore, as women age, they become less central to the plot, and therefore less important (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). The majority of women are single (unmarried), although over half are shown involved in a romantic relationship (Signorielli, 1989, 1991). This statistic is in sharp contrast with the population living in the United States, where only 18% of women are single, 62% are married, 8% are divorced, and 12% are widowed (Signorielli, 1989). TV depicted women as single mothers, enjoying life on their own, with a healthy baby, a good job, an affluent lifestyle, and an active social life. In reality, 45% of single mothers live in poverty, most teen mothers live with their parents, health problems are likely and very often serious, and few single mothers hold jobs earning more than minimum wage (National Commission on Working Women, 1991–1992, as cited in Larson, 1996). Yet perhaps the largest difference between TV and reality lies in the depiction of careers. Although two thirds of real American mothers work outside of the home, on TV only one third of mothers did (National Partnership for Women and Families, 1998). Also, most TV women who were in the work force held professional jobs, a figure three times larger than that of the 1975 U.S. census (Greenberg, Neuendorf, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Henderson, 1982). TV portrayed jobs that were largely traditional male occupations (40 of 68), as opposed to traditionally female or gender-neutral occupations (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). Taken together, these findings represent a skewed portrayal of women, which poses a problem for the viewer trying to make sense of reality. According to cultivation theory, women may become dissatisfied with their lives and themselves due to TV's inaccurate portrayal of women.

One of the most troublesome TV program categories is the soap opera because network TV targets adolescent girls. All three major networks broadcast

soap operas until 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, 52 weeks a year. Soap operas now comprise 10.5 hours of programming per day (Cantor, 1979; Lowry, Love, & Kirby, 1981). Stedman (1971) suggests the soap opera is meant to give an "illusion of reality." Yet this "reality" is seriously skewed in many arenas: sex roles, sexual activity, single motherhood, and careers (Larson, 1996; Signorielli, 1989, 1991). Despite numerous studies of general TV content analysis, there are relatively few studies focusing solely on the soap opera. According to Greenberg et al. (1982), the number of empirical studies on soaps numbered less than a half dozen by the late 1970s; even less research on the medium has been undertaken since then. Cantor (1979) gives several reasons for the genre's neglect, including a lack of interest from critics and the largely female audience. Because of cultivation theory and mainstreaming, soap opera research is becoming more vital as the viewing audience grows dramatically. Lack of past research in the area necessitates a need for this study, as does the rise in teen violence, sexuality, pregnancy, and suicide, which may all be linked to a faulty perception of reality shaped through the viewing of TV shows.

The goal of this study was to explore the portrayal of women in 21st-century soap operas in light of its importance according to cultivation theory and mainstreaming. Four major hypotheses were tested. The first hypothesis was the majority of women portrayed on soap operas would be single. The second hypothesis explored the role of work in women's lives. Specifically, the working woman would be employed in a professional role, most likely in a prestigious company, and would enjoy a generous salary, unlike the average working woman. Hypothesis 3 was that the single mother would be depicted enjoying domestic bliss. She would experience very little work-life conflict, would have a strong support system, would enjoy a middle-to upper-class lifestyle, and would have few or no child-care problems. The final hypothesis stated the majority of female characters would be young (18–30), as compared to their male counterparts, who would be considerably older (40–65), unlike real-life age divisions.

Method

Procedure

Data were collected on daytime TV from two major TV networks, ABC and CBS, from September 27 to October 13, 2000; this study omitted NBC due to extensive coverage of the 2000 Olympics, which preempted regularly scheduled programming. *The Young and the Restless*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *All My Children*, and *Port Charles* were taped from 12:30

p.m. until 2:00 p.m., Eastern Daylight Time, on Mondays and Fridays.

This study used content analysis to examine the depiction of women in soap operas. The variables assessed in the analysis included marital status (single, dating, married, divorced, widowed), working status (employed, unemployed, professional, nonprofessional, company prestige, salary), motherhood/domestic bliss (single, work-life conflict, men in life, family support, socioeconomic status, problems with child care), and age (18–30, 31–50, 51+). Two trained monitors independently recorded, coded, and analyzed each character's demographics and frequency of behaviors using a checklist. Several categories were operationally defined. The classification of jobs as professional versus nonprofessional was based on observable characteristics, such as an office environment. Work-life conflict was determined by objective criteria (e.g., such as missing work due to the illness of a child). Raters coded family support in each episode based on observable conflicts within the family. Problems with child care were also determined based on observable behavior, such as being late to a meeting because of a tardy babysitter. Interrater reliability was calculated using the percentage of perfect agreement and averaged 97% overall.

Results

The sample consisted of 95 characters (54.7% were women, 45.3% were men). The binomial test of the ratio of men to women did not differ significantly from that of the general population. The majority of female characters were single (69.2%), as were the majority of men characters (62.8%); this result supports the first hypothesis that the majority of women characters would be single. A chi-square test comparing these frequencies to real-world statistics on marriage yielded a significant difference, $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 21.89, p < .0001$. Only 21.4% of women and 29.3% of men were married; 38.9% of characters were divorced. A chi-square test revealed that this percentage was significantly higher than that of the general population, $\chi^2(1, N = 95) = 148.94, p < .0001$. Only 9.5% had been widowed, which was not significantly different than the general population.

Careers were classified as professional, nonprofessional, or unemployed because of the ease of objectively scoring in this manner. A chi-square test found a significantly high proportion of women employed in professional roles on soap operas, $\chi^2(1, N = 33) = 42.74, p < .0001$. Sex was independent of employment, with the majority of both male and female characters working in professional positions (75% and 53.1%, respectively). However, there was a dif-

ference in unemployment rates between the sexes, with 18.4% of women being unemployed, whereas only 5.0% of the men did not work. A chi-square test comparing the general population female unemployment rate (4.6%) with the soap opera rate yielded a significant difference, $\chi^2(1, N = 77) = 19.47, p < .0001$. The rate for men was not significantly different than in real life. The findings supported part two of our second hypothesis, that the working TV woman would be employed in a professional role in a prestigious company, earning a good salary; 76.5% of the women held prestigious positions at their places of employment and 90.7% garnered a good salary. Although not statistically significant, it should be noted that a smaller percentage of TV men than TV women enjoyed a good salary (89.7%), whereas a higher percentage of men's careers on TV were prestigious (82.4%).

A small percentage of women were single mothers (12.6%), which does not differ significantly from that of the general population. However, the depiction of their lifestyle was vastly different from real-life single mothers. Work-life conflict was experienced by only 8.3% of women on TV. A majority of the mothers had men in their lives (75%), whereas 83.3% had the support of their family. Most notably, 100% of the women had no child-care conflicts, and 100% were classified as upper or middle class.

Age was divided into three categories: young (18–30), middle-aged (31–50), and older (51+). Findings showed most men and women were 31–50 (61.4% and 45.1%, respectively). Twenty-four percent of men and 39.2% of women were 18–30. The smallest group was 51+, consisting of 13.6% of men and 13.7% of women. A chi-square test comparing age of soap opera characters to the ages of the general population was significant for women, $\chi^2(2, N = 50) = 8.22, p < .01$, but not for men.

Discussion

Women and men were present in equal numbers in the soap operas viewed, although the depiction of women was not always equal to the portrayal of the male characters, nor was it necessarily reflective of real life. The majority of characters on the soap operas were single, supporting the first hypothesis and coinciding with the findings of previous research (Signorielli, 1989, 1991). Very few soap opera characters were married, in sharp contrast to reality, in which almost 50% of the population is married. Divorce is also more prevalent on soap operas than in the real world; many characters have been divorced multiple times. Marital status on soap operas is misrepresentative, leading the

characters open to perpetual romance without any responsibilities.

Work also differs dramatically in the soap opera world. Verifying research conducted by Greenberg et al. (1982) and supporting Hypothesis 2, the majority of the characters were professionals. Unemployment rates were higher for women than for men and did not reflect the actual current unemployment rate in the U.S., with soap opera characters being much more likely to be unemployed. Few characters, regardless of employment, faced any financial issues; all characters seemed to enjoy economic success. Most characters held prestigious positions, with almost all men and the majority of women working for a highly respected company. Perhaps reflecting employment in the real world, men were slightly more likely to work in a prestigious setting than women. Obviously, this portrayal of employment does not reflect reality; soap opera characters were significantly more likely to have a professional career in a prestigious company with an ample salary than the average American employee.

Rate of single motherhood on soap operas did not differ significantly from that of the general population; however, the lifestyle of the soap opera mothers did, supporting research conducted by Larson (1996). Almost none of the single mothers on the soap operas experienced work-life conflict or child-care conflict. Real-life single mothers often juggle a career with domestic responsibilities and struggle to find a babysitter during office hours. Most single mothers on the soap operas had a man in their life; many women had several. One single mother-to-be was even shown in her wedding gown, 9 months pregnant and about to be wed. Dating life as a single mother in the real world is often difficult, if not nonexistent. Many single mothers do not have time or suitors (Larson, 1996). The majority of the soap opera women had the support of their family. No scenes were shown in which the parents quit speaking to the single mother, and there were no arguments when Grandma was asked to baby-sit. Finally, all of the single mothers were upper to middle class. Not one mother or mother-to-be experienced economic hardship. This portrayal is not reflective of reality, in which many single mothers must move in with family members or rely on welfare to make ends meet. Soap opera portrayals of single motherhood are potentially dangerous to a young and impressionable viewing audience. Raising a child alone is made to look easy, even fun. This depiction is contrary to many real-life experiences and is a disservice to viewers, according to cultivation theory (Larson, 1996; Morgan, 1982).

The findings partially supported the fourth hypothesis. The majority of female characters were not young, but neither were the majority of male characters. This finding differs from previous research (Beck, 1978; Davis, 1990; Gerbner & Signorielli, 1982), which found that women are portrayed as younger than men. Most soap opera stars were middle-aged, whereas very few stars were older. However, the age of men on the soap operas was reflective of the age of men in the general population; the age of women on soap operas was not. More women were 18–30 on the soaps than in the population, and less were 51+ than in the general population. Although the majority of women were middle-aged, there were a considerably larger number of young women on soap operas than in real life.

Some of the findings were encouraging; the fact that an equal number of men and women were portrayed is a step in the right direction. Also, the research showed sex to be independent of marital status, type of employment, and age, which also varied from past research. However, TV still depicts women in a false light. Many more soap opera characters are young, single, and professional than in the general population. This false portrayal makes the women of daytime TV seem more beautiful, accessible, and economically independent than the average woman, which could contribute to lowering viewers' self-esteem or distorting their worldviews, according to cultivation theory. TV also glorified single motherhood; real-world conflicts between life roles, family members, and career were not shown. Because increased numbers of teenage girls are tuning in, and TV presents soap operas to viewers in a real-life format, this portrayal could be particularly dangerous, giving girls an unrealistic picture of single motherhood.

This study has methodological strengths and limitations. A major strength is the subject of the research. Although soap operas are a major source of programming, researchers have conducted very few studies on daytime TV. Less than a half dozen studies were undertaken by the end of the 1970s, and research in the area tapered off in the 1980s, yet soap operas are historically the most enduring programs. Their persistence in American culture makes the soap opera an important topic for study. However, due to the limited previous research, this study had to create original hypotheses, thereby eliminating any possibility of a longitudinal content analysis comparison.

Another limitation of the study was the fact that it was not feasible to analyze a whole season. Soap operas are aired Monday through Friday, year-round. Although different networks were taped on different

days, this study did not attempt to tape every soap opera every day. Two major networks, ABC and CBS, were included, with NBC being omitted as the result of the timing of the study, which coincided with the 2000 Summer Olympics.

Analysis of the taped soap operas also yielded both strengths and limitations. Multiple raters coded the shows, thereby counteracting any rater bias that could potentially confound the data. However, due to the nature of the hypotheses (e.g., age of character), some guessing was utilized. Objective information about this variable was rarely if ever available, introducing some subjectivity into this particular hypothesis.

More research on soap operas needs to be conducted. Future investigation should continue to focus on content. One important variation could be a longitudinal study of soap operas from the 1950s to the present. Variables of particular interest would be the changing roles of women, sexual attitudes and morals, alcohol and drug abuse, and character demographics. Another important area for future research is the effect of soap operas on the viewer. Future research designs should assess the impact of daytime TV on both attitudes and behavior. Topics to consider might include changes in beliefs about gender roles; alteration of opinions about controversial topics such as racism, sexual activity, and crime; changes in sex role behavior; and modification of certain activities, including, but not limited to, sexual activity, drinking and eating behavior, and physical abuse.

In conclusion, continuation of research on the content and effects of daytime TV is an important area of study. Variables studied in the past need to be reinvestigated, more factors should be considered, content changes should be studied and analyzed, and researchers should concentrate on the application of these findings. The portrayal of women on TV is important, insofar as it helps to shape women's identities and ideas about themselves. Because daytime TV is aimed at women, the depiction of female charac-

ters on these shows becomes even more critical. If women do not see themselves reflected in the characters, they may become dissatisfied with their lives or feel like failures because they are struggling with mundane issues, whereas the women on TV are CEOs of prestigious companies. Women have come a long way on TV, but the next step needs to be adequate and realistic representation of all women, not just a chosen sector. Women on soap operas need to age, marry, struggle with economic hardship, be lonely occasionally, argue with their family about a babysitter—in short, live.

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