

The Presence and Portrayal of Social Groups on Prime-Time Television

JAKE HARWOOD and KAREN ANDERSON

This paper describes a content analysis of the presence and portrayal of age, sex and ethnic groups in all prime-time dramas and comedies from the major networks in 1999. Older adult, child, female, and Latino characters were underrepresented, whereas middle-aged, male, and white characters were overrepresented. No group differences were found in terms of whether the characters were shown in major or minor roles. A measure incorporating assessments of attractiveness, quality of dress, personality, and story function revealed that older characters, males, and Latino characters were portrayed somewhat less positively than others. Results are discussed in terms of socialization processes and intergroup theory.

■ During the past thirty years, considerable research has described the portrayals of characters on television. The purpose of the current study was to update our understanding of characters on prime-time television, specifically in terms of characters' social group memberships. Theoretically, we suggest that such work is important for two related reasons. First, considerable research has described the role of television and other media in socialization processes related to social groups. Viewers' orientations to their own and other social groups have been shown to be influenced by television portrayals (Abrams & Eveland, 2000; Harwood, 1999a). Second, work in the realm of intergroup social psychology has shown the role that media play in shaping the relative status of groups in the broader sociostructural context (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). Hence, television is a crucial location in which relationships between social groups, stereotyping, group identity, and the like, are played out. Three social group memberships are the focus of this work—age, sex, and ethnicity. These are group memberships that are easily observed and coded, and which are relatively obvious to even casual viewers of television shows. In

The authors express thanks to Jana Matthews, Yasuko Sugawara, Lynne Brown, Jay Hoedoyo, Micah Kafitz, Mike May, Niki Nichols, Ryan North, Seth Weisblatt, and Cassandre Beaubouef for their assistance with the project, and to two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. An analysis of an unrelated portion of this data set is published in Harwood and Anderson (2001). *Jake Harwood* (Ph.D., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1994) is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas. He is interested in the relationships between communication processes and social group memberships. His research focuses on the interpersonal and mass communication contexts. His recent work has appeared in the *Journal of Communication*, *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, *Communication Monographs*, and the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. *Karen Anderson* (M.A., Texas Tech University, 1999), is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas. Her primary interests are relationships and identity formation in interpersonal and group contexts.

addition, they are groups that are central to current intergroup issues in the United States. The vast majority of civil rights/affirmative action debates in recent years have centered on these groups. Below, we present a brief theoretical rationale for the current research and review previous research concerning portrayals of these social groups on television before presenting our empirical research.

Theoretical Rationale

Two theoretical frameworks provided a rationale for the current research. First, some prior research has demonstrated that the media can affect individuals' conceptions of their social groups and their perceptions of intergroup relations. For instance, studies examining Cultivation Theory have shown that individual conceptions of the demographic make-up of the real world relate to television viewing (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980). Specifically, individuals who watch large volumes of television tend to make demographic estimates that are closer to the television population than the actual population in terms of age (Gerbner et al.) as well as sex and race (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). Research in the area of socialization indicates that group portrayals can influence attitudes. For instance, Gerbner et al. (1980) detected small but significant correlations between exposure to television and endorsement of age stereotypes. Others have demonstrated correlations between sex-role attitudes and exposure to stereotypical television content (Herrett-Skjellum & Allen, 1996; Ross, Anderson, & Wisocki, 1982), while still others show that children's attitudes become significantly more sex-typed after the introduction of television to a previously television-free town (Kimball, 1986). Likewise, experimental evidence shows the negative effects of stereotypical portrayals of blacks (Ford, 1997; see also Graves, 1999; Mok, 1998), and Tan and Tan (1979) provide correlational evidence that exposure to stereotypical portrayals is negatively associated with black viewers' self-esteem. In sum, the media are transmitting and perpetuating stereotypes of social groups, and these images are affecting majority and minority group members' perceptions of groups and intergroup relations.

A second theoretical rationale for this work comes out of Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory, which has emphasized the important role of the media as an element in groups' social strength and influence (Abrams & Eveland, 2000; Giles et al., 1977). Vitality is a measure of a particular group's "strength" in society—the level of *demographic representation*, *institutional support*, and *status* that it enjoys. The construct of vitality has stimulated a huge volume of research in the last 20 years, and has been informative in explaining intergroup tensions, second-language acquisition, ethnolinguistic identity, and other variables (Bourhis, Giles, & Rosenthal, 1981; Giles et al., in press; Harwood, Giles, & Bourhis, 1994). A key element of *institutional support* is a group's representation in the media. Although considerable research into ethnolinguistic vitality has discussed the role of media portrayals, little scholarship has explicitly linked content analysis of media messages with

this theoretical concept. It is argued here that the levels of group representation on television and in other media are a direct indicator of that group's vitality in society. In other words, media content is not worth monitoring simply for the potential socialization effects it might cause at the individual level. It is also, in and of itself, an indicator of group strength and influence, and hence an important indicator of the nature of intergroup relations in society. Indeed, at a very basic level, the presence of groups on television shows is reflective of their "desirability" as an audience: As networks seek to deliver particular demographic slices to advertisers, they may feature those same demographics in their shows to attract that type of audience (e.g., creating a show like *Friends* to appeal to young single adults). This work, then, is most interested in examining media portrayals of age, sex and various ethnic groups.

Social Groups on Television

Portrayals of age groups on television. Most research examining age groups on television has focused on older adults. In Robinson and Skill's (1995) excellent summary of this work, they indicate that our understanding of the portrayal of older adults has grown considerably since the early 1970s. Typical research examined prime-time television programs, and showed that older adults were underrepresented and negatively portrayed (e.g., Aronoff, 1974; Gerbner et al., 1980; Greenberg, Korzenny, & Atkin, 1979; Northcott, 1975; Signorielli & Gerbner, 1978). For example, Gerbner et al. (1980) found that older adults were often portrayed as foolish and eccentric. Harris and Feinberg (1977) found older adult portrayals lacked depth of emotion and close personal relationships with other characters. Roy and Harwood (1997) suggested that the underrepresentation of older adults extends to television advertising. However, these authors found relatively positive portrayals of older adults in advertising. Robinson and Skill determined that older adults are often peripheral characters rather than main characters. They suggest that peripheral portrayals rely heavily on stereotypes, and thus tend to result in negative portrayals.

Dail (1988) and Peterson (1973) found no underrepresentation of older adults. In addition, they suggested that portrayals were relatively positive. However, Dail's (1988) work was limited to family-oriented prime-time programs, and only provides a comparison with one other age group (those aged "about" 55). Bell (1992) explored five prime-time programs that older adults watched regularly and concluded that older adult characters were not only central to the programs, but were portrayed as powerful and affluent. Clearly, this sample of programs did not accurately reflect the overall pattern on prime-time television (Robinson & Skill, 1995).

Older adults are not the only age group of interest. Gerbner et al. (1980) demonstrated that characters under the age of 18 were also underrepresented, whereas characters aged 25-45 were overrepresented. Greenberg, Korzenny, and Atkin (1980) found that 65% of the characters portrayed in

prime-time and Saturday morning programming were 20 to 49 years old, while only 33% of the population were within that age cohort. Similarly, Robinson and Skill (1995) reported that nearly 70% of all characters portrayed on prime-time television were between 20 and 49. In other words, middle-aged adults appear to be generally overrepresented, as compared to children, adolescents and older adults. More research has examined older adult portrayals than those of children and adolescents.

Portrayals of men and women on television. Female characters reportedly have been underrepresented on television (Elasmar, Hasegawa, & Brain, 1999; Greenberg et al., 1980). However, this gap seems to be closing. Signorielli and Bacue (1999) examined prime-time programs between 1967 and 1998, showing that women were underrepresented when compared to census data. However, they noted a trend of increased representation of women from 1967 to 1998 (see also Robinson & Skill, 1995). Elasmar et al. identified the same trend in a review of research from the 1970s and 1980s and an independent content analysis. They concluded that women were still underrepresented in the 1990s. Examination of the quality of portrayals has revealed female characters to be portrayed in less serious terms (Dominick, 1979; Elasmser et al.) and in less significant roles than men (Lemon, 1977; Elasmser et al.).

In general, female characters on television have been younger than male characters (Beck, 1978; Davis, 1990; Fouts & Burggraf, 1999). For example, Gerbner et al. (1980) determined that in prime-time television over half of the female characters were under 21, while only 28% of male characters were under 21. The reverse pattern emerged for older characters. As female characters age they tend to be less significant to the plot (Gerbner et al., 1980; Vernon, Williams, Phillips, & Wilson, 1990) and to lack clearly defined roles (Beck; Vernon et al.). Furthermore, Gerbner et al. (1980) found that older adult male characters were portrayed as active, settled, and mature, whereas older adult female characters were portrayed as dependent. Thus, there appears to have been an interaction between gender and age.

Portrayals of ethnic groups on television. In general, all non-white ethnic groups have been underrepresented on television when compared to census data (Elasmer et al., 1999; Elliott, 1984; Greenberg et al., 1980). Moreover, character portrayals of minorities have been shown to rely heavily on stereotypes (Fife, 1981; Greenberg et al., 1980). For example, Fife showed portrayals of black characters to feature a casual, laid-back attitude to life and subordinate occupational roles prior to the 1980s (see also Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, & Fowles, 1973; Northcott, Seggar, & Hinton, 1975). Black characters in comedies (as compared to dramas) historically have been more likely to achieve the same status as white characters (Lemon, 1977). Weigel, Kim, and Frost (1995) discovered that between 1978 and 1989 the proportion of time that black characters spent on screen doubled, and the frequency of cross-racial relationships tripled. Thus a trend in favor of black portrayals has seemed to have emerged. Recent work has begun to pay more attention to

portrayals of other ethnic groups on television. For example, Dixon and Linz (2000) differentiated between portrayals of blacks and Latinos in television news coverage. However, such research is rare, and little work has considered a broad spectrum of ethnicities.

Research Questions

The present study examined the presence and portrayal of age, sex and ethnic groups on prime-time network television, in part with the goal of updating our knowledge of television demographics. Specifically, it addressed three research questions reflecting a concern with the quantity and quality of such portrayals. We examined whether particular social groups were present on television in greater or lesser numbers than in the population, whether members of those groups tended to be featured in major or minor roles, and whether they were portrayed in a positive or negative fashion. These elements were extrapolated from the vitality and socialization arguments presented earlier. Specifically, if a particular social group is shown to have large numbers of characters and more prominent roles for those characters then it could be inferred that positive consequences for that group's vitality would result. Likewise, positive portrayals of the group could be related to the socialization of in- and out-group members in terms of perceptions (stereotypes) of that group. Negative portrayals of particular groups would most likely result in the propagation of negative stereotypes of that group, and perhaps would have negative consequences for group members' self-concepts. To summarize,

- RQ1: To what extent are age, sex and ethnic groups present on prime-time network television relative to their distribution in the population?
- RQ2: What is the role-prominence of individuals from age, sex and ethnic groups on prime-time network television?
- RQ3: To what extent are characters from age, sex and ethnic groups portrayed positively or negatively on prime-time network television?

METHOD

One episode of each prime-time drama and sitcom on ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC, which aired during the Spring 1999 line-up was video-taped between March 15, 1999 and May 12, 1999. The specific episodes were randomly selected from those available during this time period. Sixty-one shows (37 sitcoms, 24 dramas) representing 43.5 hours of programming comprised the sample. The time period used included a small portion of a "sweeps" period, but primarily covered regular broadcasts of shows, including re-runs from earlier points in the season. The recording units in the coding process were speaking characters in the shows. Coders were able to reliably identify characters using this criterion (Krippendorff's (1980) alpha = .94). In all, 835 characters were coded.

Eleven coders (including one author) underwent extensive training in the use of the coding scheme, and practiced on a number of shows not included

in the database (primarily shows in syndication, e.g., *Full House*). Following training, coders were randomly assigned to code shows from the database, and were informed that intercoder reliability would be assessed on a portion of their coding. Four programs from the data set (6.6%) were randomly selected for a reliability sample, and were coded at arbitrary times during the coding period by all eleven coders. These shows contained 73 characters (8.7% of the sample). The remainder of the shows was coded by individual coders. Two factors give us confidence in the coders' work on these shows. First, the coders were unaware of which shows were part of the reliability subsample, hence there was no way for them to work more carefully on those shows than the others. Second, the training and coding for this project were part of a college course; coders' grades were partially dependent on the care and accuracy of their coding.

For all variables in the analysis, reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's (1980) alpha (appropriate for use with more than two coders and different levels of measurement—i.e., nominal versus ordinal). Coders were trained to code characters on demographic characteristics (sex: alpha = 1.00; ethnic origin: alpha = .91; perceived chronological age in years: alpha = .77). For ethnic origin, there were eight categories (White, Black, Asian, Latino, Arab/Middle-Eastern, mixed, unclear, and other). For the purposes of most of the analyses reported here, only the first four categories were used, since frequencies of the other categories were very small. The estimates of chronological age were collapsed in two ways for the analyses. For purposes of comparison with census data, the estimated ages were collapsed into groups consistent with U.S. Census Bureau (2000) age codes (0–9, 10–19, 20–34, 35–44, 45–64, 65+). For all other analyses, we used 20 year spans: (0–19, 20–39, 40–59, 60+). The latter yielded larger sample sizes in each cell, allowing more statistical flexibility.

Additionally, coders classified all characters in terms of their role-prominence in the show, selecting one of four choices (scored 1–4, with high numbers indicating more prominent portrayals). *Star/co-star* characters were those featured in the opening credits, central to the story of a show, and more generally were defined as being a main reason for viewers to watch the program. *Major supporting characters* were those who had influence on the stars/co-stars of the show. These characters often appeared multiple times in a show and had a large amount of screen time. In contrast, *minor characters* interacted with the main or supporting characters, but only for brief periods of time, and generally did not have a major influence on the viewing experience. Finally, *peripheral characters* made only brief appearances in the show (generally less than 20–30 seconds of total screen time). Coding for role-prominence was reliable (alpha = .74).

Finally, coders examined four variables related to the perceived positivity of characters' portrayals (facial attractiveness, dress, personality, and story function). Coders assigned ratings on each of these variables on a four-point scale (1 = negative—4 = positive). These four variables were combined to

form a scale measuring general positivity of the portrayal (Cronbach's alpha = .65; Intercoder reliability: Krippendorff's alpha = .60). While these items are conceptually somewhat distinct, they represent a cluster of characteristics that are associated positively with one another (as revealed by the Cronbach's alpha). For the sake of parsimony, we combined them to create an overall "positivity" measure. Detailed definitions of these variables were developed and described as part of the training process. Coders were instructed to discriminate each dimension independently (e.g., just because someone looked attractive, they were not to automatically assume that they were a character who did good things). They were encouraged to consider the possible intentions of the show's writers, and the response of an average audience member to the characters, while avoiding their own biases where possible. For facial attractiveness, coders were instructed to focus solely on facial appearance, not build, clothes, or hair. The highest score (4) was reserved for characters who were "truly beautiful", while the lowest score was for "very unattractive" characters. For dress/turnout, coders were instructed to pay attention to the quality of general grooming. The highest score was for characters who were very well-groomed, wearing smart clothing (probably fairly formal), with barely a hair out of place, and who also appeared to be fashionable and stylish. The lowest level was reserved for characters who displayed a distinctly shabby turnout, with numerous aspects of their appearance being bad. The personality/social attractiveness variable was judged on the basis of whether the character was pleasant to talk to in the context of whole show (i.e., if a person was very pleasant in some situations, but in other settings was aggressive or annoying, they were scored low). High scores were for very socially skilled individuals, low scores were for hostile, intensely annoying, cynical or otherwise negative personalities. Finally, story function was rated in terms of whether the character ended up doing good things or bad things in terms of the show's storyline. Coders were instructed not to base such judgments on the character's personal characteristics—a nasty person who saved the world would get a high score. High scores were reserved for characters who did very good things in the show, "heroes", and people who directly resolved a key problem in the show. Low scores were for villain-like characters who did distinctly bad things, or attempted to harm the key characters in the show. For the latter two dimensions, coders were instructed to wait until the end of the show to make their judgment.

RESULTS

Prevalence of Age, Sex and Ethnic Groups

To address the first research question regarding the extent to which age, sex and ethnic groups are present relative to their distribution in the population, the percentage of individuals of different age groups in our data set was compared with the percentage in the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The comparison is graphically represented in Figure 1.

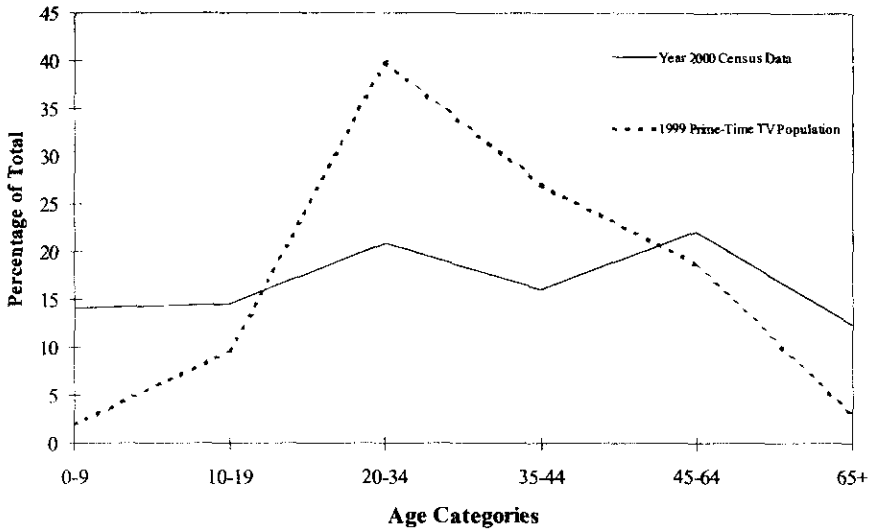


Figure 1. Comparison of Television Population and Census Data

Significant discrepancies between the television figures and census data were identified via tests of differences in proportions. These tests reveal significant differences for *all* age categories (ages 0–9: $n = 16$ (1.9%), $z = -10.13$, $p < .001$; 10–19: $n = 81$ (9.7%), $z = -3.94$, $p < .01$; 20–34: $n = 333$ (39.9%), $z = 13.50$, $p < .001$; 35–44: $n = 226$ (27.1%), $z = 8.75$, $p < .001$; 45–64: $n = 156$ (18.7%), $z = -2.30$, $p < .05$; 65+ : $n = 23$ (2.8%) $z = -8.42$, $p < .001$). Children (under 10 years old) and over 65s were the two most strikingly underrepresented age groups. Adolescents (10–19) were also significantly underrepresented, as were the late-middle-aged group (45–64). Meanwhile, the 20–34 and 35–44 year olds were significantly *over* represented in the data set compared to their presence in the population.

Women were substantially underrepresented in the television population. Men constituted almost 49.1% of the U.S. population at the time of data collection, but 61% ($n = 509$) of the characters in our sample ($z = 6.88$, $p < .001$). In contrast, women constituted only 39% of the television characters ($n = 326$), as compared to 50.9% of the U.S. population ($z = -6.88$, $p < .001$).

In terms of the ethnicity variable, our data indicated that whites were significantly overrepresented on prime-time television. White characters constituted 82.9% ($n = 692$) of characters in our data, as compared to 69.1% of the U.S. population ($z = 8.63$, $p < .001$). Latino characters were underrepresented in the data set ($n = 22$, 2.6%, $z = -8.04$, $p < .001$). The proportions of Black and Asian characters did not differ significantly

TABLE 1
Frequency of Characters by Age and Sex

| Age | Male | Female | Total |
|-------|------------|-----------|-------|
| 0-9 | 10 (.1) | 6 (-.1) | 16 |
| 10-19 | 42 (-1.8) | 39 (1.8) | 84 |
| 20-34 | 165 (-5.5) | 168 (5.5) | 333 |
| 35-44 | 160 (3.6) | 66 (-3.6) | 226 |
| 45-64 | 118 (4.2) | 38 (-4.2) | 156 |
| 65+ | 14 (.0) | 9 (.0) | 23 |
| Total | 509 | 326 | 835 |

Note. Numbers in parentheses are adjusted standardized residuals (ASRs). Their statistical significance is interpreted as would occur with z -scores.

from their presence in the population (Black: $n = 95$, 11.4%, $z = -.62$, $p > .05$, Asian: $n = 22$, 2.6%, $z = -1.55$, $p > .05$).

Given particular problems experienced by members of multiply-disadvantaged groups ("double-jeopardy": Jackson, 1985), we examined cross-tabulations of demographic variables where it was possible. Examination of sex by age cross-tabulations revealed a significant difference in the presence of males and females across age groups ($\chi^2(5) = 44.37$, $N = 835$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V^2 = .05$). Table 1 shows that women were substantially overrepresented in the 20-34 age group (relative to their presence on TV as a whole: $p < .01$). In contrast, men were overrepresented in the 35-44 and 45-64 ($p < .01$) age groups. This effect mirrors results from Gerbner et al. (1980). Our data did not show significant over- or underrepresentation of men versus women at the extremes of the lifespan. Sample sizes in these groups were relatively small and hence significant effects were difficult to detect.

Interestingly, the current data provide no evidence of differential presence of various ethnic categories across the lifespan (Table 2). However, this examination included comparisons of blacks and whites only, since these were the only ethnic categories with enough members to allow valid

TABLE 2
Frequency of Characters by Age and Ethnicity

| Age | White | Black | Total |
|-------|-----------|----------|-------|
| 0-19 | 82 (-.5) | 13 (.5) | 95 |
| 20-39 | 393 (.2) | 53 (-.2) | 446 |
| 40-59 | 177 (-.2) | 25 (.2) | 202 |
| 60+ | 40 (.6) | 4 (-.6) | 44 |
| Total | 692 | 95 | 787 |

Note. Numbers in parentheses are adjusted standardized residuals.

TABLE 3
Mean Scores for Characters' Portrayal by Age Group

| | Positivity of Portrayal |
|-------|-------------------------|
| 0-19 | 11.87 (1.10) |
| 20-39 | 11.81 (1.44) |
| 40-59 | 11.53 (1.42) |
| 60+ | 11.44 (1.43) |
| Total | 11.73 (1.43) |

Note. Standard deviations are reported in parentheses. High scores indicate more positive portrayals.

statistical testing. For this comparison, the smaller set of four age categories was used to protect against violation of statistical assumptions. No significant differences emerged ($\chi^2(3) = .63, N = 787, p = .89$). Blacks and whites appeared to be represented in similar proportions across the lifespan. Similar tests with different age categories and additional ethnic categories were not significant.

Role-prominence of Individuals from Age, Sex and Ethnic Groups on Television?

The second research question asked about the role prominence of individuals from age, sex and ethnic groups on television. Role prominence (scored 1-4, high scores indicate more prominent portrayals) was compared using ANOVAs, with the various group memberships as independent variables. No significant effects emerged for *age*, $F(3, 831) = 1.27, p > .05$; *sex*, $t(833) = 1.05, p > .05$; or *ethnicity*, $F(3, 827) = 1.75, p > .05$. Social group portrayals were not related to whether characters played major or minor roles in the shows studied.

Positivity or Portrayals of Characters of Various Ages, Sexes and Ethnic Groups

Research question three asked to what extent characters from various ages, sexes and ethnic groups were portrayed positively or negatively. Small but significant effects emerged for age comparisons of the positivity of characters' portrayals, $F(3, 831) = 2.89, p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$. Post hoc polynomial contrasts revealed a significant linear trend reflecting a downward pattern in the positivity of portrayals across the lifespan, $F(1, 831) = 7.47, p < .01$. Examination of the means in Table 3 reveals that this decline is steeper between early adulthood (20-39 year olds) and middle-age (40-59 year olds) than between other age groups. Post hoc examination of the variables comprising the positivity construct indicated that the decline was a function of chronological declines in perceptions of attractiveness ($p < .001$), with no significant differences emerging on other individual variables. Statistical controls for sex did not alter this effect.

Comparisons also indicated significant sex differences in positivity, $t(833) = 3.77, p < .001, r^2 = .02$, with males ($M = 11.58, SD = 1.59$) being rated slightly lower than females ($M = 11.96, SD = 1.10$). Post hoc examinations of the constituent variables indicated that female characters were favored in terms of attractiveness ($p < .001$) and to a lesser extent personality ($p < .05$). Statistical controls for age did not alter these effects.

Finally, comparisons of different ethnic groups also revealed significant differences in their portrayal, $F(3, 827) = 3.95, p < .01, \eta^2 = .01$. Post hoc tests indicated that Latino characters ($M = 10.73, SD = 2.12$) were rated significantly less positively than all other groups (white, $M = 11.74, SD = 1.46$; black, $M = 11.85, SD = .97$; Asian, $M = 11.59, SD = 1.01$). Post hoc examinations of the individual portrayal variables revealed the largest effects for story function ($p < .001$), with Latino characters serving negative story functions more than characters of other ethnicities. Effects also emerged for the personality variable ($p < .05$), with Latinos again scoring lowest.

DISCUSSION

The current data are consistent with previous research in a number of ways. First, older adults, children, and women are underrepresented on comedies and dramas shown in prime-time network television. Second, white characters, men and middle-aged individuals are overrepresented on prime-time network television. Third, women tend to be overrepresented in younger adulthood, but underrepresented in later middle-age. Fourth, older adults tend to be portrayed in a more negative fashion than younger adults. Latino characters, the focus of little previous work, were also underrepresented in the data, a fact that might be predicted from their position in society.

Three differences emerge when the current research is compared with previous work. First, our results indicate that older women are underrepresented on prime-time television, but not any more so than would be predicted by the combined underrepresentation of older people in general and women in general. Previous analyses have suggested that older women might suffer an additional "double-jeopardy" threat in terms of their representation. That said, the *absolute* number of women over the age of 60 in the data was extremely small ($n = 13, 1.5\%$ of the characters), which is consistent with previous research. Second, earlier research has found underrepresentation of black characters (Elliott, 1984; Greenberg et al., 1980) on television. In contrast, the current data show them to be present in accord with their population presence. Finally, the study revealed no difference in role presence that is attributable to age, sex or ethnicity. This contrasts with Robinson and Skill's (1995) suggestion that older adults tend to appear in peripheral roles.

The data have implications for members of the groups examined. As argued in the introduction, groups that were portrayed in accord with their

population presence, and not portrayed in a negative fashion (e.g., whites, blacks) have positive group vitality, and are unlikely to fall victim to negative socialization effects. It is notable that black political groups have been among the most active in terms of campaigning for improved media representations in recent years (e.g., NAACP, 1999, 2000). The current data suggest that such campaigns may have achieved some level of success. Indeed, it is notable that recent concerns expressed by NAACP have focused on the presence of African-Americans in media management and "behind the scenes" roles, rather than on screen (NAACP, 2001). Naturally, complacency is not advisable based on these findings. Continued vigilance and increased analytical sophistication are necessary. For instance, the data support a continuation of concern about the "ghettoization" of black characters in a limited number of shows (Dates & Barlow, 1993). Of the black characters in our sample, half were from only seven of the shows (about 11% of the shows studied).

Other groups (particularly Latinos, older adults, children, and women) were clearly underrepresented in the current data—in the case of Latinos and children these are groups that previous research has largely ignored. The socialization literature reviewed earlier suggests that such portrayals might have a negative influence on viewers not from these groups. In particular, such media content might reinforce notions that individuals from these groups constitute a smaller portion of the population than they actually do (i.e., socialization of demographic vitality perceptions), and hence, perhaps, that they are not particularly important. The socialization literature also suggests effects for ingroup members in terms of their own perceptions of their groups. Previous research has suggested that such portrayals might result in lowered self-esteem, or other negative perceptions of the ingroup. In terms of vitality, these data provide a clear indication that the vitality of these groups in terms of "institutional support" is low in society. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the current data is the portrayal of Latinos, who are underrepresented *and* portrayed negatively (particularly, it appears, in terms of their role in the story: they do bad things). In other words, from both the vitality and the socialization perspectives, this is not good news for Latinos. The National Council of La Raza has been working to promote positive portrayals of this group and draw attention to underrepresentation, and it can be hoped that their work begins to have an effect. Showtime's recent addition, *Resurrection Blvd.*, may be a first indication of change in this direction.

Limitations of the current study should be acknowledged. First, the sample was not representative of the entire television season. The sample was drawn from approximately a two month period between March and May, 1999. We believe that we achieved a census of major characters on prime-time dramas and comedies for that season—one episode of every show was coded. However, with regard to peripheral characters it is possible that seasonal issues might have biased the content sampled. For instance, a sample involving the year-end period might have involved more children, as

they can sometimes be focal characters in stories surrounding, for example, Christmas festivities. Second, our portrayals measure (positive-negative) did not achieve desired levels of reliability. This was in spite of extensive training and refining of the component variables' definitions. In the future, definitions should be developed that are easier for coders to process and apply. In addition, the measure included diverse concepts. Although these coalesced to form a measure of portrayal with borderline internal consistency, coding the individual subcomponents in a more detailed fashion might result in more sophisticated understandings of the precise nature of portrayals. More generally, future research should use larger subsamples for assessing reliability. Logistics restricted our sample to only four shows (73 characters). This is less than 10% of the total number of characters in our sample, and only 6% of the shows.

Failure to examine networks such as the *WB* or *UPN* may also be viewed as a limitation of the current study, particularly as these networks tend to feature more minority ethnic portrayals. We would note that those two networks garnered less than half of the viewership of any of the networks examined in the current study during that season (Hontz, 1999). Our primary goal was to examine the portrayals reaching the largest audiences.

One additional caveat should be offered. The fact that individuals are creative and selective in their media use has become widely accepted in recent years, driven largely by work in the tradition of Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985). Therefore, content analyses such as the current one must acknowledge that no individual viewers are actually watching all the shows that are being analyzed—the analysis examines a universe of television from which viewers actually select a small (non-random) sample. Crucially, one determinant of viewers' consumption patterns may be their identifications with particular social groups (e.g., age, sex, ethnicity, etc.). Recent work has demonstrated that individuals have a preference for shows featuring ingroup members, even when the content of shows is controlled (Harwood, 1997; 1999a; 1999b). Ratings data support this contention, in revealing that individuals consistently prefer to view shows featuring members of their own cultural (e.g., Dates, 1980; Greenberg & Atkin, 1982), age (e.g., Harwood, 1997), and gender groups (e.g., Sprafkin & Liebert, 1978). In addition, research suggests that (at least for children), membership in the same social groups (e.g., gender groups) is crucial in determining personal identification with specific television characters (Hoffner, 1996), and that characters from the same social groups are perceived as more similar to self than outgroup characters (Feilitzen & Linne, 1975; Greenberg, 1972; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Sprafkin & Liebert). Individuals creatively seek messages in ways that make their *personal* viewing profiles considerably more supportive of their group identity than television as a whole. That does not detract from the need to examine broad patterns of media portrayals. As emphasized from the vitality perspective, those portrayals illustrate important patterns of societal status and control. However, understandings of the relationship

between identity and media processes must involve the role of identity as both an independent and dependent variable.

A couple of future research goals are suggested by the current analysis and surrounding theoretical implications. First, the links between social identity processes and content analytic results should be examined more directly (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Demonstrating correlations between gender identities, age identities, or ethnic identities and viewing habits is one productive way of understanding this. Specifically, to what extent are individuals selecting programming with demographic characteristics that support their valued identities (Harwood, 1999a). Similarly, to what extent and in what ways are groups mobilizing to protest underrepresentation and negative portrayal (e.g., Buxton, 1991; NAACP, 1999) in order to protect their groups. These kinds of analyses would provide useful connections between intergroup theories and concepts such as vitality on the one hand, and media theories and concepts such as uses and gratifications on the other. A second direction for future studies might be experimental work on the consequences of viewing particular group portrayals for group identification, attitudes towards media producers, desire to seek alternative media, and the like. Previous research (outlined earlier) has focused on the consequences of media use for stereotypes and other variables such as self-esteem. Less work has examined the consequences for how people feel about their group memberships, and/or how they feel about intergroup relations. Finally, there should be increasing attention paid to television as a site for intergroup contact, as viewers encounter individuals from groups with which they may have little contact in their daily lives. This may be particularly likely in shows featuring diverse cast members, which may have a greater tendency to draw a diverse audience (as opposed to, for instance, a show about mostly white, single, young adults, which may appeal fairly exclusively to white, single, young adult viewers).

This research had two main goals. First, this work provided a descriptive "update" on the presence and portrayal of social groups in prime-time television. Second, it presented a theoretical basis for continued content analytic work of this kind. Our perspective is that content analytic research serves a function in understanding socialization processes concerning intergroup relations. In line with Abrams and Eveland (2000), the results of this kind of content analytic work reveal the societal status and support for particular groups—their vitality.

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