

The Portrayal and Influence of the Personal and Professional  
Behavior of Prime-Time Television Characters

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# Abstract

This study examined the personal and professional behavior of 198 prime-time television characters with major speaking roles. The results showed that higher status occupations still predominate on prime-time television. Characters with higher occupational status made fewer mistakes in their personal and professional lives, displayed greater integrity, and were less likely to use violence than those with less prestigious positions. A separate analysis indicated that viewing of entertainment or public affairs television was only slightly related to a variety of attitudes toward real-life professionals.

## The Portrayal and Influence of the Personal and Professional Behavior of Prime-Time Television Characters

The portrayal of occupations on television is a growing issue. The Mobil Corporation, for example, has been running a series of ads in newspapers and magazines the last few years which has severely criticized the "antibusiness bias" of news programs. Other professionals express concern about effects of unrealistic portrayals of their occupations. As one attorney put it, "People's preconceived notions of how a 'criminal' is supposed to look, perpetuated by television, affect verdicts--probably many, many more than we suspect (Lewis, 1974, p. 6)."

Such concerns are not unwarranted. Public opinion polls since the late 1960s have shown a steady decline in public confidence in doctors, business executives, and attorneys, among other professionals (Hastings & Hastings, 1987). Few studies have systematically assessed the portrayal of occupations on television. Little evidence also exists about the influence of occupational portrayals on viewers' perceptions of their real-life counterparts. This study addresses both issues.

### Prime-Time Portrayals of Occupations

Content analyses have demonstrated that television portrays a world of high-status occupations. DeFleur (1964) found that television characters had mostly professional or managerial occupations, while those less prestigious were not much in evidence. Seggar and Wheeler (1973) found that 82% of the formal occupational roles on daytime and prime-time television were

portrayed by men. White men, according to their research, tended to have higher-status occupational roles than minority men. Trend data indicate that, although an increasing number of leading roles are being played by black men and women, they are not occupationally equal to white men on television (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs & Roberts, 1978; Kalisch & Kalisch, 1984).

Studies of the professional behavior of television characters have concentrated on physicians, lawyers, and police officers. McLaughlin (1975) reported that doctors on television possess "uncanny ability" to dominate and control the medical problems and personal lives of their patients, often successfully performing high-risk operations in a variety of specialties from week to week. Television's lawyers have been portrayed as having the skills to prove consistently the innocence of their unjustly accused clients, many times by causing the actual criminal to confess on the stand under vigorous cross examination (Winick & Winick, 1974; Dershowitz, 1987). Police officers and private detectives similarly have been shown to have the intelligence and tenacity to solve virtually any type of crime (Daley, 1972).

These studies were conducted, however, before the recent trend toward "realism" in prime-time programming. Programs such as "St. Elsewhere," "L.A. Law," "Hill Street Blues," and "Moonlighting" have portrayed the personal and professional lives of their characters complicated and not always successful. Moreover, current television programming is portraying a wider range of occupations, with women and minority characters more often represented. These trends should be evident in contemporary

analyses.

### The Influence of Occupational Portrayals

A variety of studies have shown that television viewing affects perceptions of real-life workers. Gerbner and Gross (1976) have demonstrated a greater tendency for heavier television viewers to overestimate the number of persons involved in law enforcement than light viewers. Volgy and Schwarz (1980) found heavier viewers of medical programs had more positive attitudes towards doctors and less supportive of nontraditional occupational roles for women than light viewers. Respondents in a study by Jeffers and Meiss (1982) indicated that television doctors and nurses were more friendly, put patients more at ease, showed more interest, and were more understanding than their real-life counterparts. Gerbner (1987) has provided evidence that negative portrayals of scientists on television encourages hostile conceptions of science.

### Research Questions

Based on the foregoing discussion, four research questions guided this study: (1) what proportion of television characters in current prime-time programming have higher-status occupations? (2) What proportion of higher-status occupational roles are played by female and minority characters on current prime-time programs? (3) How does the personal and professional behavior of television characters vary by occupational status? and (4) Does television viewing of occupational portrayals relate to public attitudes toward professionals encountered in daily life.

## Method

### The Content Analysis

Occupational portrayals were assessed by a content analysis of all prime-time programs, excluding movies, shown on ABC, NBC, and CBS between March 11-25, 1987. If a regular program was not shown the first week, the episode shown the next week was coded. The units of analysis were all characters with major speaking roles and who were not students. Due to the complexity of the analysis, five characters were chosen at random when more than five qualified ones occurred in the program. The final sample consisted of 198 characters. Students in an advanced audience measurement class taught by the senior author did the coding. Trial analyses were conducted until sufficient levels of inter-coder reliability were obtained for each measure.

The occupation of each employed character was originally ranked from one to seven using Hollingshead's occupational-status scale (Borjean, Hill, & McLemore, 1967). After an initial examination, however, the results were reduced to five categories:

Category I: Executives or proprietors of major businesses and major or lesser professionals, including physicians, lawyers, nurses, accountants, military officers, police captains, and engineers.

Category II: Administrative personnel, executives and proprietors of small businesses, and minor professionals, including actors, newspaper

and TV reporters, detectives, school teachers, and police officers.

Category III: Clerical and sales workers, technicians, skilled manual laborers, machine operators, and unskilled employees.

Two other categories included unemployed characters and those whose jobs defied classification, such as angels, spies and good Samaritans. The autonomy allowed characters in performing their jobs was classified as 1=reports to someone, 2=both reports to someone and someone reports to them, and 3=self employed or someone reports to them.

The network (CBS, NBC, or ABC) and type (drama, comedy, western, or crime) for each character's program was recorded. The coders also recorded each characters' gender, race (white or minority), age (18-35, 36-55, and 56+), and marital status (married, not married, unclear).

The personal and professional behavior of each character were also measured. The number of unique mistakes made by each character in the course of their personal and professional affairs in each program were counted. Outcomes of professional and personal relationships for each character were classified as 1= negative, 2= no outcome, or 3= positive, according to whether or not the outcome appeared to be satisfactory to other characters in the program. Personal and professional integrity were coded as 1= dishonest, 2= not clear, or 3= honest, based on whether or not the character committed a dishonest act during the program.



Characters were classified according to whether they 1= did or 2=did not commit an illegal act during the course of the program. They were coded according to whether or not they used physical violence or verbal aggression (1=yes, 2=no) to achieve their professional goals. Finally, coders made a subjective judgment as to the attractiveness of the characters (on a five-point scale ranging from very unattractive to very attractive) and whether they were 1= not liked or 2=liked by most other characters in the program.

#### The Survey

The second portion of the analysis examined relationships between frequency of viewing televised entertainment and public affairs programs and attitudes toward doctors, lawyers, and police officers. The sample consisted of 400 adults age 18 or older in the metropolitan Toledo area from January 18 through 31, 1988. A probability sample of telephone numbers was drawn from the metropolitan directory and the last digit increased by one. After three call backs, a response rate of 53.9% was obtained, based on total completions and refusals.

Entertainment television viewing was measured by an index of the frequency of watching situation comedy, detective/crime, sports, soap operas, game, and drama programs. Public affairs television viewing was measured by an index of the frequency of watching national news, local news, news specials, and news magazine programs.

Respondents were asked whether they were "satisfied" or "not satisfied" with the services of a doctor, lawyer, and police

officer who last provided them services. They were additionally asked whether they thought "most people" in each profession were "honest" or "dishonest." Respondents were asked whether people who practice each profession were "more intelligent," "less intelligent," or "about the same level" as most people. Finally, they rated doctors, lawyers, and police officers according to whether they were able to help their clientele "most of the time," "some of the time," or "not at all."

## Results

### Analysis of Occupational Portrayals

Consistent with previous studies, the results showed that prime-time television is dominated by characters with high-status occupations. One-third of the characters' professions were classified as Category I, 29.3% in Category II, and 18.2% in Category III, while 10.1% of the characters were not employed outside the home and 9.1% held unclassifiable occupations. Police officers or private investigators were the most frequently occurring characters (17.2%), followed by lawyers (7.0%), and business executives (6.1%). However, a broad range of occupations were represented in the 51 programs analyzed, including singers, secretaries, sales clerks, innkeepers, dock workers, lobbyists, TV repair persons, butlers, travel agents, architects, TV station managers, bailiffs, helicopter pilots, psychologists, interior designers, writers, and teachers.

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Table 1 about here

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The results in Table 1 show that the occupational status of prime-time television characters somewhat varied according to network and type of program. ABC had the most characters in Category I (38.5%), followed by NBC (32.9%) and CBS (29.5%). NBC had more characters not employed outside the home or with an unclassifiable occupation (11.8% and 12.9%) than ABC (7.7% and 7.7%), or CBS (9.8% and 4.9%). Dramatic programming had the greatest number of characters with Category I occupations (45.6%), while the characters in comedy and crime programs more often had lower-status occupations.

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Table 2 about here

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The results shown in Table 2 for occupational status by the characters' demographic characteristics are consistent with those from earlier studies (Seggar & Wheeler, 1973; DeFleur, 1964). More males than females held Category I occupations (35.5% versus 29.9%), as did characters older than 35 (36.4% versus 28.6%) and those married (37.7% versus 30.8%). White and minority characters, however, had occupations with about equal status, a result which differs from previous studies (Lemon, 1978).

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Table 3 about here

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Table 3 shows levels of personal and professional behavior by the five occupational categories. Characters in the highest occupational category logically had positions with the highest level of autonomy, with the exception of those in the miscellaneous category. Characters in the highest occupational category also made somewhat fewer mistakes, were less likely to use violence, and were more honest, although the outcomes of their activities were slightly less positive, than those in Categories II and III. Characters in the unemployed and miscellaneous categories stand out as considerably different in most types of behavior than those in Categories I, II, and III.

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Table 4 about here

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Table 4 shows the results of a stepwise regression analysis of occupational status (excluding the unemployed and miscellaneous categories) on the demographic and personal and professional behavior measures. Among variables entering the final equation, autonomy ( $b = .27$ ) proved to be the strongest predictor of occupational status, followed by use of violence ( $b = .18$ ), professional integrity ( $b = -.17$ ), a dummy variable for comedy programming ( $-.16$ ), personal outcome (.15), age (.11), and a dummy variable for drama programs (.11). Overall, these variables accounted for 20.8% of the variance ( $p < .01$ ) in occupational status.

## Analysis of Public Attitudes toward Professionals

The results from the survey indicated that doctors, lawyers, and police officers were highly regarded by the respondents. Over 70% of the respondents were satisfied with the services provided by the doctor, lawyer, or police officer with whom they last had contact. Similarly, at least 75% of the respondents believed most people in the three professions were honest. Among the respondents, 81% rated doctors as more intelligent than most people, while 69% felt that way about lawyers and 16% about police officers. Concerning their helpfulness to clients, 87% of the sample believed doctors could help patients most of the time, 56% felt that way about lawyers, and 60% about police officers.

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Table 5 about here

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In general, the results shown in Table 5 indicate that neither entertainment nor public affairs television viewing is related to attitudes about doctors, lawyers, or police officers. Nevertheless, there are significant, if small, correlations between entertainment viewing and perceptions of the intelligence of doctors and police officers. Public affairs programming viewing is significantly related to perceptions of the honesty and intelligence of police officers.

## Discussion

As previous studies have indicated, prime-time television

portrays a world of wealth, power, and achievement. At least one-third of the characters with major speaking roles in the 51 programs analyzed had higher-status occupations, with the largest concentration in drama programs. However, 47.5% of the prime-time characters had less prestigious occupations, while 19.2% either did not have jobs outside the home or were employed in an unclassifiable position. Although law enforcement officers or private investigators, lawyers, and business executives were the most frequent characters, the range of occupations portrayed on prime-time television was striking.

The demographic attributes of prime-time characters appear to be more varied than in earlier studies. Female actors played 38.9% and minority actors 15.6% of the major-speaking roles analyzed, substantial gains over past seasons on television (e.g., Greenberg, Simmons, Hogan, & Atkin, 1980). The results indicated that characters with higher-status occupations still were most often male, married, and older. Yet almost 30% of female characters had higher-status occupations, while white and minority characters were equally likely to have prestigious positions.

Among characters with classifiable occupations, those with the highest-status jobs committed somewhat fewer errors, had higher professional integrity, and were less likely to use violence than those in less prestigious positions. Unemployed characters, however, exhibited the most positive behavior, while those in the miscellaneous categories had the least positive behavior.

Only small relationships were found between viewing entertainment and public affairs television and perceptions of the hon-

esty, intelligence, and helpfulness of doctors, lawyers, and police officers, as well as satisfaction with their services in real life. Given that direct experience usually overrides media effects, these results are perhaps not surprising (Zucker, 1978). Future studies might look at attitudes toward professions with which people have little contact.

The results of this study are encouraging, given the increasing tendency for young people to model television characters. This study indicates that the occupational role models available to them on television have become less stereotyped than those presented to previous generations. We hope this healthy trend continues.

## Notes

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1. No western programs were shown on the networks during the coding period.

2. Thus, for example, the outcome of a trial was considered positive if the defendants were satisfied with the services provided by their attorney, regardless of the exact verdict rendered.



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Table 1  
Percentage of Prime-Time TV Characters in  
Occupational Status Categories by Network and Program Type

	Occupational Category						n	$\chi^2$
	I	II	III	Unemployed	Miscellaneous	Total		
Network								
NBC	32.9%	22.4	20.0	11.8	12.9	100%	85	7.17 *
ABC	38.5%	30.8	15.4	7.7	7.7	100%	52	
CBS	29.5%	37.7	18.0	9.8	4.9	100%	61	
Program Type								
Drama	45.6%	27.9	11.8	7.4	7.4	100%	68	20.26 *
Comedy	25.6%	26.8	25.6	12.2	9.8	100%	82	
Crime	29.8%	36.2	14.9	8.5	10.6	100%	48	

Note. \*Not significant.

Table 2

Percentage of Prime-Time TV Characters in Occupational Status  
Categories by Demographic Attributes

	Occupational Category						n	$\chi^2$
	I	II	III	Unemployed	Miscellaneous	Total		
Sex								
Male	35.5%	32.2	17.4	5.0	9.9	100%	121	9.87**
Female	29.9%	24.7	19.5	18.2	7.8	100%	77	
Race								
Minority	32.3%	19.4	25.8	9.7	12.9	100%	31	3.02
White	33.5%	31.1	16.8	10.2	8.4	100%	167	
Age								
18-35	28.6%	31.2	24.7	6.5	9.1	100%	77	23.74*
36-55	36.4%	31.3	15.2	7.1	10.1	100%	99	
56+	36.4%	13.6	9.1	36.4	4.5	100%	22	
Marital Status								
Married	37.7%	28.3%	7.5	17.0	9.4	100%	53	21.83**
Unmarried	30.8%	31.6	22.2	9.4	6.0	100%	117	
Not Clear	37.0%	22.2	18.5	0.0	22.2	100%	27	

Note. \*\*p < .05; \*p < .01

Table 3  
Standard Scores of Personal and Professional Behavior  
by Occupational Status Category

N = 198

	Occupational Category				
	I	II	III	Unemployed	Miscellaneous
Autonomy	.18	-.04	-.56	--	.59
Professional Mistakes	-.05	.05	-.15	--	.35
Personal Mistakes	-.04	-.02	.02	.13	.05
Professional Outcome	-.10	.07	-.08	--	.31
Personal Outcome	-.20	.13	.04	.28	-.07
Professional Integrity	.14	-.06	-.17	--	.01
Personal Integrity	-.03	.03	.01	.61	-.45
Legality	-.01	.02	.02	.27	-.37
Use of Violence	.24	-.15	-.03	.34	-.68
Use of Verbal Aggression	-.04	.06	-.03	.15	-.16
Likeability	-.10	-.03	.06	.44	-.16
Attractiveness	-.02	-.15	.11	.07	.24

Note. Higher scores indicate higher levels of autonomy, professional and personal mistakes, more positive professional and personal outcomes, higher professional and personal integrity, less use of violence and verbal aggression, and greater likeability, attractiveness and legality. A difference of  $\pm .25$  between any two standard scores is significant at least at the  $p < .05$  level.

Table 4

Standard Coefficients for Stepwise Regression of Occupational Status  
on Demographic, Personal, and Professional Behavior Variables

N = 158

Independent	Occupational Status
Autonomy	.27
Use of Violence	.18
Personal Outcome	-.17
Comedy Programming	-.16
Professional Integrity	.15
Age	.11
Drama Programming	.11
$R^2$	.208*

Note. Only variables significantly contributing to total variance explained, based on an increment to  $R^2$  test, are shown.

\* $p < .01$

Table 5

Correlations between Entertainment and Public Affairs TV Viewing  
and Perceptions of Doctors, Lawyers, and Police Officers

Perception	Entertainment Viewing	Public Affairs Viewing
Satisfaction with:		
Doctors	.05	.05
Lawyers	.04	.02
Police Officers	.01	.01
Perceptions of the Honesty of:		
Doctors	.04	.04
Lawyers	.01	.06
Police Officers	.01	.11**
Perceptions of the Intelligence of:		
Doctors	.08**	.00
Lawyers	.06	.01
Police Officers	.10**	.12**
Perceptions of the Helpfulness of:		
Doctors	.04	.00
Lawyers	.00	.05
Police Officers	.01	.05

Note. \*\*p < .05