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# The Family in the Tube: Potential Uses of Television\*

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*It is proposed that television programs be utilized in classes on the family. The utility of program content is critically discussed. Also considered are methods for classroom use, and problems of access to program material. Recommendations are made for section meetings at NCFR, and other national organizations where those concerned can communicate about the problems of use and access. Also suggested is a campaign to assure access to program material.*

Television needs to be examined and critically analyzed because our reality is increasingly defined by the shadows on the tube. Despite the vast wasteland that constitutes most programming, there are presentations which can be useful for teachers of courses on the family. Even bad programs can be used to develop analytical and critical skills. On the positive side, television offers coverage that is current, often the acting is excellent, and a variety of topics is presented. It is the purpose of this paper to review television programs critically in relation to their potential use in courses on the family. We will discuss the utility of program content, and consider methods of using programs, including the problem of copyright limitations.

But criticism must proceed from some value perspective. Two perspectives are modal in the United States of the late Twentieth Century. The first perspective supports conventional models of family life in which males are the primary breadwinners and females are wives, mothers and house-

keepers. The second view values growth into more equal, flexible and genuinely intimate relations between male and female. The authors of this paper do not wish to prescribe either type of family. Freedom of choice should prevail. We do, however, believe that a number of people are striving to improve family relationships. This paper is therefore written with those in mind who choose to move from conventional roles into those which are more flexible, equalitarian, and person-oriented, while intensifying a sense of commitment to each other and their children.

## The Utility of Program Content

There are several related questions which we wish to discuss concerning the potential utility of television programs about the family. First, does a program present a realistic view of contemporary family life in whatever social class and ethnic group it is attempting to portray? Stereotypes may be reinforced by some programs. "Sanford and Son" provides an example of a lower-lower class black family with one parent absent, in which father and son frequently attempt to exploit each other. The program is reminiscent of "Amos and Andy." But such a program may be useful precisely because it presents a stereotype of black family life which can be discussed, thereby alerting students to the nature of the distortions it conveys.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Discussion of the stereotype can be placed in a

A second question concerns whether a program presents a truthful view about family life in the past. In "The Waltons" one element is nostalgia about a romanticized past. Such euphoric views of the past seem to say that true happiness, male-female equality, and excellent communication existed in southern farm families during the great depression. In addition to being a dubious generality, it may reinforce unrealistically high expectations for the family of the present. But it may provide models for discussion of relationships between family members.<sup>2</sup>

Thirdly, do programs portray a range of alternative models of family relationships? Various viewers may wish to use these models to construct personal standards for evaluating and modifying their own family relationships. But often the models available on television are negative. They are the people we would not like to be, such as Archie Bunker. But these have some potential utility, if the viewer approaches them critically. More difficult problems for the classroom concern those models that seem so good and natural that we do not question them. These are likely to be persons playing conventional roles very skillfully. These roles are attractive, but may also be obsolete. The method of analysis of these conventional models depends on the viewpoint of the instructor and the student. Obviously, some will prefer to define these conventional models in positive terms because they reflect their own self-concept and socioeconomic origins.

Finally, it may be asked if a program provides situations which can be subject to explanatory analysis. For example, does the program provide situations which instructors and students can analyze in an attempt to show how family relationships influence each other, and how social influences affect interaction in the family?

We wish now to apply these questions to

three types of programming: (a) day time serials, (b) prime time serials, and (c) public television programs and specials on commercial stations.

#### *Day Time Serials*

Day time serials, or soap-operas, are focused in the present tense, and are uniformly unrealistic in that they present family life so burdened with turmoil that the day to day troubles of the viewer's family seem euphoric by comparison. It is also true that the classic (Astrachan, 1975) soap-operas concentrate on blue collar behavior patterns in upper-middle class, conventional WASP families. Most husbands are professionals. Social issues are seldom mentioned. Wives are submissive, few have careers, and those who do are likely to get into trouble, ranging from rape to cancer (Ramsdell, 1973). These classical programs are typified by "As the World Turns." But since 1970 a new type of program has emerged featuring contemporary issues. This quasirealism is seen on "All My Children" (Astrachan, 1975). It has featured such themes as the generation gap, narcotics, venereal disease, the feminist struggle, and working women. The characters have even included some ethnics. One series with a consistently feminist theme is "One Life to Live."

But whichever model seems preferable, it may be that both of them undermine the concept of family commitment. First, "by their visual code denying that children are important in family life" (Goldsen, 1975, p. 66). Secondly, through the models of adult relations in which commitment and trust among family members are shown as non-existent in a "world of fly-apart marriages; throwaway husbands, throwaway wives and—recently throwaway lovers" (Goldsen, 1975, p. 66).

No discussion of soap operas would be complete without mention of "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman." Presenting a satire on the blue collar family's approaches to problem solving, it does regularly deal with current issues of family life. The blue collar concept of male and female sexuality was explored in the episode about the Mae Olinsky campaign for "foreplay is fairplay." Here we see the middle class ideal of equal feminine

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socio-historical context by also presenting to students the excellent 16 mm film: "Black History: Lost, Strayed, or Stolen?"

<sup>2</sup>A related 16 mm film that is clearly nostalgic and unrealistic is "Our Changing Family." It treats the farm family before the industrial revolution. A critique of this kind of view of "life down on grandma's farm" has been written by Goode (1963).

satisfaction in sexual relations filtering down to the blue-collar wives of Fernwood, and the resulting shock waves of reaction from the males. Also extensively treated was emerging adolescent sexuality, and the parent's inability to be of any assistance to their children. Wife beating was presented during a series of episodes in which we saw that the wife could neither find help nor escape from her situation. The fact that the program deals with so many such issues invites the charge that it presents a negative stereotype of blue collar family life. Even if all these themes do not occur in any one particular blue collar family, most of them have been reported in research studies as being more frequently true of that social class and too frequently true of other class levels.

### *Prime Time Serials*

Whereas daytime serials portray many conventional, although troubled models to the female viewer, prime time serials reach the male with numerous images of the conventional inexpressive male (Balswick, 1971) as cop or cowboy. But in recent years the networks have received pressure to reduce the amount of violence during prime viewing hours. Possibly as a result, there has been a modest increase in the number of shows dealing with the family. A series called "Family" was begun in 1976. It presents the Lawrences, a conventional upper-middle class suburban family grappling with an oldest daughter's shaky marriage and subsequent divorce, a middle son's struggle for identity, and the growth of a youngest daughter from childhood into adolescence. These problems are refracted against the relationship of the parents to each other. The program is presented without gimmicks, silly situations or verbal gags, and explores some of the most current issues with sensitivity: the acceptance of homosexuality, the right of an adopted child to know who its natural parents are, the inner conflicts and struggles of an unmarried teenage mother, the late developing girl's sense of being different from her peers, and a relative's refusal to acknowledge her own dependence on alcohol.

While the Waltons and Lawrences are conventional families, there has been a modest expansion of the range of family types. For

example, there are families portrayed at all social class levels. But if we examine these closely we find a color bias. White families such as "Maude," "Rhoda," "Bob Newhart," and "We'll Get By" are primarily upper-middle-class. Few white families are portrayed as blue collar, as in "All in the Family," or poor as in "The Waltons," who it would be noted were only poor because of the depression. But if we examine black families we find none that are upper-middle class. Two are lower-middle class ("That's My Mama," "The Jeffersons"), and two programs focus on the poor or lower-lower class: "Sanford and Son" and "Good Times." There is no stable blue collar black family represented. In short, black families are portrayed in a less favorable light, than are white families (See Lieberman, 1972). Discussion of these programs can alert students to this bias. From the same perspective we see that "Chico and the Man" portrays Chicanos at the blue-collar level. But primarily the worker-boss relationship is shown, no Chicano family, or Native American family, is presented as a serial on national television. Given the tendency of TV writers to stereotype, members of these groups may be grateful for the oversight.

In classroom discussions, "Good Times" has considerable utility. It deals with current issues such as busing, and the bias of IQ tests. But its utility also exists in terms of examining its contradictions. The characters move back and forth between behavior patterns that seem strangely middle class (the understanding of IQ tests) or stereotypically and incongruously that of the poor (father Evans uses his belt intensively on a neighbor child's bottom).

But while the evening serials may deal with current themes, and may be expanding the range of families, they are slow to present some family structures which really exist, and need exploration. One of these is the single parent family. During the 60's the networks

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<sup>3</sup>These programs are classified on the basis of husband's occupation. "The Jeffersons" are listed as lower-middle class despite their aspirations for higher status seen in their high-rise luxury apartment, because the husband's occupation has, for most of his life, been that of a small businessman.

presented this area with "Family Affair," "The Partridge Family," "The Courtship of Eddie's Father," "My Three Sons," "The Doris Day Show," and "Julia." But all of these shows, strangely enough, involved one parent families created by the death of the spouse. Yet, in real life divorce disrupts more young marriages than does death. It would appear useful to clarify to students that this television pattern reflects sacrificial homage to the conventional moral code.

"One Day at a Time," a Norman Lear production, presented a break with the preceding pattern. It presented a divorced woman as a head of a single parent family. At first it appeared to support television's blue code that no divorced person is allowed to survive as a parent, unless they remarry or practice sexual abstinence and play games about it. But it became apparent eventually that mother has a lover, a fact we learn in a sequence lasting several weeks in which oldest daughter runs away in order to assert her demands for more independence than mother can comfortably grant. In the process the theme of teen-age sexuality is explored. Although an attempt is made to examine real problems facing contemporary families with teen-agers, and to deal with the plight of the single parent, all too frequently there is a reversion to preposterous plots, sight gags, and one-liners reminiscent of the silly situations and sexual teasing so prevalent in films of the 1950 era.

#### *Public Broadcasting Programs and Commercial Specials*

Many of the topics and treatments avoided by regular programming on commercial stations can be found on public broadcasting channels (PBS) and in all the infrequent specials on commercial television. On PBS we have seen "Upstairs-Downstairs," produced by CBC, exquisitely presenting the Edwardian upper-class and its lower class servants. Here there is an abundance of material for classroom discussion as we see the contrasts in family and personal relations among the Edwardian rich and poor. Also presented is the inequality experienced by females of all classes, leading to a sequence on the emergence of the women's suffrage movement.

"The Ladies of the Corridor" was a well done dramatization of the life of older women in a New York City hotel apartment. We see three women struggling with their fear of loneliness. One is an alcoholic divorcee. One is recently widowed and seeks to find a new life by clinging to an uninterested male who finds that her efforts to hold on are too constricting. The third female seeks to avoid loneliness by controlling her son. There is abundant opportunity to analyze interpersonal relations.

"Double Solitaire" is an excellent dramatization of family relationships and received the award for "Best Film in Competition" at the 1975 meeting of the National Conference of Family Relations. The views on marriage of three generations are depicted. Grandson declares that without total love there is no love and the only thing to do is split. His father replies that only rock splits, while people tear. Grandfather advocates biting the bullet. Grandmother accepts double solitaire. The program provides opportunity to analyze the influence on the male of beliefs about romantic love, the converse influence on the female of beliefs about companionship love, and the resulting conflict of interests between them despite their good faith in each other and their valiant attempts at communication. The program ends in an uneven deadlock with the wife's desires for companionship submerged in the husband's relentless pursuit of romantic love. What alternative endings can be constructed by students in a class on the family?

The 13 one-hour documentary episodes entitled "An American Family" depicted a beautiful, apparently happy, upper-middle class family. But Pat Loud awoke to the realization that she did not have the companionship she wanted and that the children were soon to be leaving her with a shell of a marriage. Unlike Barbara in "Double Solitaire," Pat asks for divorce and the series ends with a divorce actually reported on television. The final episode depicts the scene with the lawyer and husband in which the finances are discussed with excruciating honesty.

Also on PBS was a half-hour documentary on "Joyce at 34," a liberated woman of the present, who produces her own documentary

of the birth of her child, and shows herself in a dual-career family. The film skillfully shows Joyce's family background, and it provides a number of clues useful in explaining her career goals in relation to her desire to have only one child.<sup>4</sup>

On commercial television, among the worthwhile specials was one in which a middle-class housewife awakes to her boredom and explains to her husband and children "I Love You . . . Goodbye." This title and its theme suggest a plot that ends in reconciliation. One could stop the tape, if it is available for presentation, and ask students how they see the program ending. The conclusion will be a surprise to many.

"Tell Me Where It Hurts" was a beautiful drama about a blue collar family. It pursues the major theme of a wife's identity in the empty nest stage of the cycle. Through a circle of friends, mostly blue collar wives, a fascinating range of responses involving other themes is revealed (see *Le Masters*, 1975). Another program of merit is "But What if the Dream Comes True?" It is a documentary of an upper-middle class family in the very well-to-do suburb of Birmingham, Michigan. The film constitutes a devastating criticism of the pursuit of status through materialism, and the emptiness of family life in America's most affluent suburbs. If the program were viewed without sound, would another interpretation be possible?

Finally, "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman" constituted a genuine breakthrough in dramatizations of black family life in that while Miss Jane was shown as a strong woman, it was not done at the expense of the males. Her husband and son were presented as heroes who stood up for their rights, rather than as the shuffling Toms of the stereotypes. "Roots" also presented a more balanced view of the strength of black males and females than we have been accustomed to expect, and included a view of the solidarity of black family life on the plantation which has only recently been rediscovered. The basic theme is the struggle of one man to preserve his identity and sense of heritage and pass it on

to the generations that follow despite the destructiveness of the system of slavery. The theme would have reached the viewer with greater impact if the twelve hours of "Roots" were edited to eliminate those sensationalized scenes of violence and sex that were not present in the book. Nevertheless, the film is characterized by exceptional acting on the part of the entire cast, and has reached more viewers than any other program to date. The drama constitutes a powerful experience shared by Americans and informing them about the enormous strength of black family life.

### Methods for Use

The most common procedure for use of a program is to show it in its entirety, and then discuss it. When a program has a strong plot and worthwhile acting this would appear to be a desirable procedure. A variety of courses in different fields can utilize a program in this way and provide observations useful for discussing the major concepts being presented by the instructor.

An alternative procedure is to show a program up to the point where a critical choice is presented to the characters. The tape can then be halted and a discussion of alternative solutions considered, followed by viewing the rest of the program, and then encouraging a discussion and evaluation of the author's solution in relation to course concepts. Another use of programs is as a basis for brief essays comparing the program to the student's own family. Choice of useful programs is crucial, and class discussion should precede the student's own family analysis. One purpose of any assignment and analysis of TV programs is to develop the students' critical faculties. The ability to evaluate a program in terms of its biases constitutes an essential skill for any educated person.

Different programs will make possible discussion of a variety of concepts. The topics discussed also vary with the nature of the course, and the emphasis given by a particular instructor. Listed below are some topics, stated in question form, in relation to "All In the Family." This program is selected because almost all students have some familiarity with it. Each instructor will, of

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<sup>4</sup>"Joyce at 34" is now available in 16 mm. (See Carstens, 1976).

course, prefer to restate the questions and develop corollaries or alternative questions.

1. What are the characteristic patterns by which the family members make decisions and solve problems? What is a preferable model?
2. What is the pattern of personal relationship between Archie and Edith as compared to the daughter and son-in-law? What is the pattern of relations between parents and daughter, and between parents and son-in-law?
3. Does Mrs. Edith Bunker's character grow from week to week? Does she reach out to liberate herself and then move forward in succeeding weeks or does she fall back to more conventional portrayal?
4. Is the portrayal of the various members of the family a distorted stereotype or is it accurate?
5. Are there some people in real life who accept Archie as a model and agree with his viewpoints? Do other persons view Archie's attitudes and behavior as a negative model to be avoided? Which kinds of social influences affect these two persons?
6. Which viewers are likely to accept or reject the daughter and son-in-law as positive models? Why?
7. What is Archie Bunker's social class? What evidence is used to arrive at this classification?
8. Are ethnic and sexist stereotypes altered, reinforced or left unchanged? Under what conditions does one or another outcome occur?
9. What role does humor play? Does it help us face problems or does it make ethnic and sexist prejudice seem palatable?

A different program would make possible different discussion questions. For this reason consider the last and thirteenth episode of "An American Family." Discussion of a rich variety of topics can be stimulated by this one-hour episode. We also wish to consider it here because its potential value in the classroom makes acutely clear the need for access to copyrighted material.

1. What is the social class of this family? What evidence is used to reach this conclusion?

2. Judging from father Bill Loud's conversation with his friend at lunch, what kind of relationship with his wife does he want and practice? Was it conventional, marriage companionship (Burgess & Locke, 1945), or open (O'Neill & O'Neill, 1972)?
3. Why did their marriage last twenty-one years? When did they marry? What ideas prevailed at that time? Should divorce after two decades automatically be viewed as an event for sorrow?
4. What factors seemed to bring about their divorce? Some possibilities to consider: the type of relationship as in question #2, the approach of the empty nest stage, the influence of women's "lib," the husband's business and its economic situation, the alleged homosexuality of the eldest son.
5. Evaluate the economic arrangements for the divorce that were discussed between Bill and his lawyer. Are they fair to both parties and the children? How would you prefer to settle these matters, if it were your divorce?
6. What is the level of aspirations for the future held by Lance, the eldest son? Are they surprisingly low for an eldest son in an upper-middle class family? What factors may have brought about these low aspirations?
7. What is the influence of birth order (Forer, 1969) upon the five Loud children? Apart from low aspirations and alleged homosexuality, does Lance show any of the behavior that is often seen in eldest male children? Do the second and third born males display any behavior that reflects their parents' relationship and the fact that there are two younger sisters?
8. Do the two youngest sisters act in a way more or less assertive than one would expect given the pattern of their mother's relationship to their father?

The preceding methods of analysis utilize a particular program and analyze it as presented to the viewer. The danger in this procedure is that the viewer's focus may be narrowed by the boundaries of the program itself. An alternative procedure would ask what issues or themes are underexplored or avoided? Taboo

themes<sup>5</sup> are difficult to identify because they are kept out of our consciousness so uniformly. Consider the following:

1. Menstruation has been suggested as the most ignored of all topics. In November, 1967, "Family" presented it as a lesser theme without, however, using the word "menstruation." It was treated as a normal step in physical development, but little information was presented about it.
2. As of the 1976-77 season, homosexuality was presented as an aspect of behavior of normal humans in several commercial programs such as "Family" and "Alice." The lesbian relationship was seen on PBS in "The War Widow." How is the theme of male or female homosexuality dealt with across the spectrum of television programs? Is it stigmatized or normalized, and what are the consequences of these two value perspectives?
3. Aging remains a neglected theme, and the process of dying as a stage of life, and as an aspect of interpersonal relationships has been avoided. Recent exceptions include a 90-minute special on "Dying." One episode of "Family" dealt with the relationships among family members of the person about to die, and several evenings of "Good Times" were concerned with the necessity of grieving.
4. Untouched by television is the reconstituted family (Duberman, 1974, pp. 16-17, 196-207), consisting of two divorced spouses, possibly with children from one or both of the prior marriages. This type of remarriage is a reality of increasing frequency. The complexities in interpersonal relations are staggering.

Avoidance of issues had been the consistent pattern of television until Norman Lear's productions, such as "All in the Family" and "Maude" which presented numerous issues and used humor to defuse them. While the issues were brought out of the closet their seriousness and complexity

were understated. More recently, Lear's programs have explored a theme over several episodes: Archie's unemployment and later his ill-fated affair turn into stages of growth for Edith's identity as a person. Abortion was featured in a series of episodes on "Maude," and in later sequence of programs Maude's husband, struggling with his alcoholism, was suddenly bankrupt, and faced the problem of identity in middle age. The viewer may well ask if these issues are now explored in sufficient depth on any program, and what treatment are these issues given across the range of television programs.

And what of basic social issues? Has unemployment been adequately analyzed? What of the family life of the working poor, a population segment more numerous than the unemployed? How is the influence of politics and the economic system presented on television as it affects families in different social classes and ethnic groups?

#### *Problems of Access*

A major problem in use of television programs in the classroom is that of delivery to the student. Several approaches are possible: Clearly, some programs are so popular that almost all students have seen several of them. For those few students who have not seen any program in a series it is possible to notify them in advance that a particular series will be discussed.

The procedure with greatest impact involves viewing directly in the classroom. Many universities have facilities for taping programs, in which case it would seem that an instructor only need schedule that taping and present the program in the classroom using easily run videotape equipment such as the Sony 3600 series. But it must be emphasized, the recording or use of a copyrighted program is legally possible only with permission of the copyright holder. Obtaining such permission may be difficult or impossible.

Four non-commercial distributors have recently clarified this situation as it applies to their programs. The four distributors are the Public Broadcasting Service, the Agency for Instructional Television, the Great Plains National Instrumental Television Library, and the Public Television Library. They will permit

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<sup>5</sup>We are grateful to Judith Senderowitz (The Population Institute, Washington D.C.) for stimulating our thinking on this area.

universities, colleges and schools to record and use programs within their school for seven days following local broadcasting. The program must then be erased, and no copies retained, unless prior written authorization is obtained.<sup>6</sup>

There does remain the unresolved question of use of copyrighted materials when the purpose is not-for-profit. This matter is currently being litigated.<sup>7</sup> The outcome of the judicial process is uncertain. It appears desirable that the viewpoint of concerned professionals be made known to those in position to render a decision. There is a need for sections of national conferences to consider this issue. Organizations possibly involved include the National Council on Family Relations, the American Anthropological Association, the Society for the Study of Social Issues, the American Sociological Association, and numerous others. It is desirable that concerned members of these organizations reach consensus on the central dilemma involved: Should programs relating to the family be freely available for use in the classroom? Or should educational institutions using videotapes of television programs pay a fee to the producers? The latter approach may insure the availability of more programs in the future, and could be useful if the fee is moderate and access to program material is not impeded by the need for permission prior to taping and presenting a program to a group of students.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>From Sherwood E. Bridges, Director, Division of Instrumental Resources. Central Michigan University, and Videocassette and CATV Newsletter, Beverly Hills, CA. 1976, 6, 1.

<sup>7</sup>According to Seibert (1964) no clear court cases have determined that not-for-profit educational use is within the doctrines of "fair use," but he reports that the meaning of "fair use" is wider in situations where the commercial element is absent.

<sup>8</sup>A promising development is the possible future availability of videodisks which would provide a record of a television program selling for up to ten dollars and requiring a four or five hundred dollar playback machine. It remains to be seen whether such disks will become available for a wide range of current programs, and under what conditions they can be used in classrooms.

## Conclusion

We have stated that there is much potential utility in television programs. Clearly, the most daring and challenging programs have been presented on PBS and as specials on commercial channels. Even serials have utility, but usually because they present negative models of interpersonal relations. If the potential classroom utility of television programs about the family is to be realized, the obstacle posed by copyright limitations must be overcome. There is a need for concerned teachers of courses on the family to develop consensus on purposes and procedures to insure access to current television programs.

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