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# BLACK FAMILY IMAGERY AND INTERACTIONS ON TELEVISION

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**Most people would probably agree** with the assertion that “the family is at once the most sensitive, important, and enduring element in the culture of any people” (Billingsley, 1968). For it is within the family—the principal socializer—that an individual’s personality and identity are formed and norms and values of particular cultures and subcultures are transmitted. Perhaps because of this central role that the family plays in the socialization of individuals, the family has been of great interest to scholars and laymen alike.

Television families have also been of great interest. As Glennon and Butsch (1982) pointed out, many of the more than 200 fictional families that have appeared in “family series” since 1946 are known and loved by millions of Americans. The Nelsons (*The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*), the Cleavers (*Leave it to Beaver*), the Bunkers (*All in the Family*), the Waltons, the Jeffersons, and so forth, have all become a part of our collective history and culture.

Black families have been represented in television programming scheduling since the 1950s. This article examines the portrayal of Black family life on commercial television during the 1985-1986 season. Its purpose is twofold: (a) to provide data that, when analyzed in the context of previous studies, will allow for the establishment of a trend of how the Black family has been portrayed on television; and (b) to examine Black family portrayals as a possible model for social learning by children.

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## RESEARCH ON BLACK FAMILY PORTRAYAL

Past research concerning the imagery of Black television families is scarce and generally concentrates on the Black family in situation comedies. One qualitative researcher, Gordon Berry (1980), identified frequent representations of Black, minority, and lower-class life-styles appearing on television and concluded that family presentations are disrupted by parent and sibling aggressive behavior; families show a continuous picture of female-dominated households whether or not a male is present; family life portrays frequent friction between males and females; and family portrayals show children with little supervision and love.

Research by Greenberg and Atkin (1978) supports some of the above notions. They observed several situation comedies with Black families (*What's Happening*, *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, etc.) and concluded that Black families are isolated from Whites, are more likely to be without a father, and Black mothers are more dominant when critical family decisions are made.

Greenberg and Neuendorf (1980) observed the interactions of Black and White families. Their findings indicate that within Black families on television the Black males were more active in family interactions than White males; the Black sons played a more active role than Black daughters or White children; and conflict as the content of family interactions was more prevalent in Black family units when compared to White family units. Are these still the messages emanating from television about Black families? The research described below addresses this question.

## METHOD

The sample of programs examined for this analysis was limited to half-hour, prime-time, situation comedies that featured recurring, intact Black nuclear families. During the 1985-1986 seasons, three shows met these requirements: (a) the *Cosby Show*, which featured a mother, a father, four daughters, and a son; (2) *227*, which was composed of a mother, father, and one daughter; and (3) *Charlie &*

*Company*, which featured a mother, father, two sons, and a daughter.

One third of each of the shows aired during the season were randomly selected, coded, and analyzed. Coding was done by two persons; coder reliability tests, which were done periodically on all content variables, were always above 90.<sup>1</sup>

Modifications of the definitions used by Seggar (1975), Hinton, Seggar, Northcott, and Fontes (1974), and DeFleur (1964) to determine imagery were adopted for use in the present study. These definitions were as follows: (a) role significance—the classification of family member portrayals as major, supporting, minor, and bit parts; (b) dress—the classification of clothing apparel as showy, well dressed, ordinary, or poor; (c) occupational status—the classification of clearly observable tasks being performed that can be classified using the broad occupational categories used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census; (d) competence—the classification of intelligence displayed, the ideas proposed, or the actual successful and affective completion or carrying out of a task as very competent, generally competent, sometimes incompetent, and very incompetent; and (e) wealth—determined by context, possessions, and special access to facilities and things, classified as wealthy, comfortable, ordinary, and poor.

Interactive behavior was coded according to direction—that is, whether the interaction was conflictual or affiliative in nature—and mode—the giving, seeking, or receiving of advice, information, or orders (Greenberg & Neuendorf, 1980). An interaction began when something was said between one or more of the characters and ended when one of the characters left the scene or a new character entered (Greenberg & Atkin, 1978).

## RESULTS

The first question to be addressed is what image of Black family life emerges from the three shows included in this study. In contrast to previous shows, where the majority of Black families were lower-class and rather poorly dressed, the families in 227 and

*Charlie & Company* are working/middle-class, and the family in the *Cosby Show* is definitely upper-middle-class, with dress ranging from ordinary to well dressed on all three shows. As to overall wealth, the Huxtables (*Cosby Show*) are home owners, relatively wealthy, and live in a New York brownstone that is nicely furnished; the Jenkins (227) and the Richmonds (*Charlie & Company*) rent their apartments and enjoy rather ordinary-to-comfortable life-styles.

Occupation-wise, the mother and father on the *Cosby Show* are an attorney and obstetrician, respectively. The mother on *Charlie & Company* is a schoolteacher and the father works for the Department of Transportation. The mother on 227 does not work; initially, the father was a blue-collar worker, but later he was promoted to a professional/managerial position.

Regarding role significance, all of the family members assumed major or supporting roles, and all were portrayed as being competent or very competent. Clearly, these shows offer a different, more positive view of Black family life.

We now examine and compare family role interactions among characters on the three shows. In terms of mode of interaction—that is giving, seeking, or receiving advice, information, or orders—the data reveal that most of the interactions appearing on all three shows were equal give and take. Specifically, 81% of the interactions on 227, 83% of those on the *Cosby Show*, and 84% of those on *Charlie & Company* were coded as equal giving and receiving of advice, information, or orders.

Who is doing the interacting? On 227, 58% of the interactions were between the husband and wife and 27% between mother and daughter. What is noteworthy is the low, compared to the other two statistics, amount of interaction between the father and daughter (see Table 1). On the *Cosby Show*, the father's interactions with all four of his daughters are approximately the same as with his son, 15% and 16%, respectively. Again, wife-husband interactions account for the largest amount, 31%. Surprisingly, the mother's interaction with her daughter makes up only 7% and with her son, 3%. Sibling interactions account for a substantial portion of the interactions; sister-sister interactions constitute 14% of the total

interactions, and brother-sister interactions, 15%. On *Charlie & Company*, as in the other two shows, wife-husband interactions constituted the largest category (37%), followed by father-son (18%) interactions (see Table 1).

The data were then examined in terms of male-female role interactions. Clearly, on the *Cosby Show*, the females are the initiators, initiating over 60% of the interactions. Mrs. Huxtable, as wife and mother, initiates over 30% of the interactions. Interestingly, the father is the one more likely to be the receiver of an interaction, leading the list with 23%. Similarly, over 60% of the interactions on *227* were also female-initiated. Contrast this with *Charlie & Company* where the majority of the interactions are male initiated, with the father and sons each initiating approximately 20% of the interactions. On this same program, males are also most likely to be the receiver of an interaction; the father, husband, and the sons each received more than 15% of the total interactions (see Table 2).

How do these findings compare with those of previous research, particularly those of Greenberg and Neuendorf (1980)? The present research found, as did Greenberg and Neuendorf, that the most active pair in Black television families is the wife-husband pair. Although there was a tendency for fathers to interact more with their sons than with daughters, this was only slightly so and not markedly so as in the pre-1980 shows analyzed by Greenberg and Neuendorf.

Perhaps the most important findings pertain to the low amount of conflict evident in the interactions. In *Charlie & Company*, 9% of the interactions were characterized by conflict (i.e., one character opposed or attacked the other) as were 10% of those occurring on the *Cosby Show*. *227* had the lowest amount, 4%. This is in contrast to Greenberg and Neuendorf's research, which found Black family interactions characterized by conflictual behavior in 17% of the interactions. Interestingly, the majority of the conflicts involved daughters and sister. (It should be noted, however, that there was little evidence of siblings being active in conflictual family role interactions as was found and reported in Greenberg & Neuendorf [1980].)

**TABLE 1**  
**Family Interactions, by Show (in percentages)**

Role Pair	Show		
	<i>Cosby Show</i>	227	<i>Charlie &amp; Co.</i>
Mother-daughter	7	27	12
Mother-son	3		7
Wife-husband	31	58	37
Brother-brother			4
Sister-sister	14		
Sister-brother	15		9
Daughter-father	15	15	13
Father-son	16		18
Total interactions	<i>N</i> = 119	<i>N</i> = 75	<i>N</i> = 107

**TABLE 2**  
**Family Role Act Initiation and Reception by Role and Show (in percentages)**

Role	Initiation			Reception		
	<i>Cosby Show</i>	227	<i>Charlie &amp; Co.</i>	<i>Cosby Show</i>	227	<i>Charlie &amp; Co.</i>
Mother	15	7	15	8	22	7
Father	14	7	20	23	11	20
Husband	8	31	8	12	23	19
Wife	16	21	16	12	28	11
Daughter	12	35	12	14	15	15
Son	12		21	3		17
Brother	4		6	9		1
Sister	19		2	18		1
Total interactions	<i>N</i> = 119		<i>N</i> = 75	<i>N</i> = 107		

## DISCUSSION

When compared with previous research, this analysis suggests that a more positive portrayal of Black families is emerging. That is, in this sample of television programs, Black families have both husband and wife present; these spouses interact frequently, equally, and lovingly with each other; and children are treated with respect

and taught achievement-oriented values. All of this takes place in an atmosphere that harbors little conflictual behavior.

These findings are important for several reasons. A great deal of the concern expressed about the portrayals of Blacks and their families is related to the perceived impact that television has on children, particularly Black children. Seemingly, positive portrayals will have positive outcomes. Consequently, by portraying Black families in a positive light, these television programs may be providing role models that promote positive attitudes and behavior.

Additionally, it should be noted that some individuals believe that the media, particularly television, shape our ideas and attitudes about what kinds of family structures and interaction are acceptable and appropriate, and what kinds are serious or funny. The media also define for us how spouses and parents and children are "supposed" to relate to each other (Glennon & Butsch, 1982; Greenberg, Edison, Korzenny, Fernandez-Collado, & Atkin, 1980). The implication here is that because children learn other attitudes and behaviors from the media, it is expected that they would also learn family roles, attitudes, and behaviors from the models presented on television (Atkin, 1986; Greenberg et al., 1980; Stroman, 1983).

As a result, the above-documented step in the direction of improved images of Black family life is to be applauded. There is a need, however, for more shows like the exemplary *Cosby Show* if a balance is to be reached in televised portrayals of Black families.

## NOTE

1. The formula used in computing the coefficient of reliability was

$$\frac{CR = 2M}{N_1 + N_2}$$

where M is the number of coding decisions on which the coders agreed, and N + N refers to the number of coding decisions made by the two coders (Holsti, 1969).

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