Social class has been a neglected factor in research on American television programs and audiences. Only a few studies specifically focus on the portrayal of class in television programming though some additional information can be gleaned from incidental remarks relevant to class in studies on other topics. Class has seldom been considered in audience research either, although media researchers from the British cultural studies tradition, through their applications of ethnographic audience research, have recently directed more attention to this topic.

Research on class content has focused on drama programming. News, talk shows, and most other genre remain unexamined. Several studies have examined sex role portrayals in television commercials, but little exists on the matter of class, except frequency counts of occupations used in studies of gender. A wide range of writers, from television critics to English professors to communications researchers have examined the texts of single drama programs or of small numbers of drama series, selected for their prominence in the television landscape.

Woven into the textual analysis of some of these analyses are remarks on class, but only a few studies have concentrated on the class-related messages of particular programs. In a 1977 Journal of Communication article Lynn Berk argued that Archie Bunker exemplified the equation of bigotry with working class stupidity, a stereotype no longer applied to race but still acceptable in characterizing the working class. Robert Sklar in his 1980 book, Prime Time America, was more hopeful about two Gary Marshall shows of the mid-1970s, when a number of working-class characters populated prime time. The Fonz and Laverne and Shirley retained their dignity in their everyday struggles against class biases. In a 1986 Cultural Anthropology article George Lipsitz examined seven ethnic working class TV sitcoms from the 1950s and found sentimental images of ethnic families combined with themes promoting consumption.

While textual studies focus on in-depth analysis of particular shows, other researchers have compiled demographic portraits across all television drama programming at a given point in time. They categorize fictional characters by sex, race, age, occupations, and occasionally the evaluative tone of these portrayals. Only a few of these studies extend beyond occupation to discuss social class specifically. But data on occupations can be used as a measure of the class distribution of television characters.

Many such studies have been done since the 1950s. Collectively, they provide a series of snapshots over time. The overall results of studies from the 1950s to the 1980s have revealed a repeated under-representation of blue collar and over-representation of white collar characters. Professionals and managers predominate. Central characters were even more likely than peripheral characters to be upper-middle-class white males. The movement of working-class people to the periphery of television's dramatic worlds produces what Gerbner called "symbolic annihilation", i.e. they are invisible background in the dominant cultural discourse. Over-representation of those at the top or at least in the upper middle class, simultaneously gives the impression that those not among these classes are deviant.

Textual criticism gives depth, demographic surveys, breadth to the understanding of television. An approach which provides some aspects of both methods is genre study, the close examination of many shows within a given genre. Sitcoms, and particularly domestic sitcoms, have been studied in this way. Ella Taylor's Prime Time Families (1989) is a good example of this type of work. Only a small number of such studies, however, address social class in more than a cursory fashion. The most extensive genre studies of class are Richard Butsch's "Class and Gender in Four Decades of Television Situation Comedies" (in Critical Studies in Mass Communication) and Butsch and Lynda Glennon's 1982 and 1983 essays in the Journal of Broadcasting and the report on Television and Behaviour, published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. These studies found remarkable consistencies in domestic situation comedies over four decades, from 1946 to 1990. Working-class families were grossly and persistently under-represented compared to their proportion of the nation's population. For over half the forty years, there was only one working-
class series on the air, out of an average of 14 domestic sitcoms broadcast annually. From 1955 to 1971 not one new working-class domestic sitcom appeared. Middle-class families headed by professional/managerial fathers predominated.

Butsch found that the portrayals themselves are strikingly persistent. The prototypical working-class male is incompetent and ineffectual, often a buffoon, well-intentioned but dumb. In almost all working-class series, the male is flawed, some more than others: Ralph Kramden, Fred Flintstone, Archie Bunker, Homer Simpson. He fails in his role as a father and husband, is lovable but not respected. Heightening this failure is the depiction of working-class wives as exceeding the bounds of their feminine status, being more intelligent, rational, and sensible than their husbands. In other words gender status is inverted, with the head of house, whose occupation defines the families social class, demeaned in the process. Class is coded in gendered terms. Working-class men are de-masculinized by depicting them as child-like; their wives act as mothers. Some writers fail to note that these male buffoons are almost always working class. They miss the message about class, and instead define it as a message about gender. These results indicate the importance of accounting for class along with gender.

In middle-class domestic situation comedies the male buffoon is a rarity. When a character plays the fool it is the dizzy wife, like Lucy Ricardo in *I Love Lucy*. In most middle-class series, however, both parents are mature, sensible, and competent, especially when there are children in the series. It is the children who provide the antics and humour. They are, appropriately, child-like. Nor are sex roles inverted in these series. The man is appropriately "manly," and the woman "womanly." The family as a whole represents an orderly, well functioning unit, in contrast to the chaotic scenes in the working class families. The predominance of middle-class series, combined with persistently positive treatment, equated the middle-class family with the American family ideal.

Reinforcing the middle-class ideal was an exaggerated display of affluence and upward mobility. Maids and other household help were far more prevalent than in the real world. Even working-class families were upwardly mobile, moving to the suburbs or having the father promoted to foreman or starting his own business.

In his 1992 article "Social Mobility in Television Comedies" (*Critical Studies in Mass Communication*), Lewis Freeman found that upward mobility in sitcoms of 1990-1992 was achieved through self-sacrifice and reliance, reinforcing the ethic of individualism which makes each person responsible for his or her socio-economic status. Thus one's status is an indicator of one's ability, character and moral worth. However, as if to temper desires of the audience the economic benefits of upward mobility were counter-balanced by the personal consequences. The economic rewards disrupted relations with family and friends.

Sari Thomas and Brian Callahan argue in "Allocating Happiness: TV Families and Social Class" (*Journal of Communication*) that portrayals in the late 1970s showed working class families who were sympathetic and supportive of each other and the characters generally "good" people. The middle class was portrayed this way too, but less so. Both contrast to portrayals of the rich who were often depicted as unsympathetic and unsupportive of each other, and as "bad" or unhappy people. The contrasts between classes convey the moral that money does not buy happiness.

Rarely has class been considered a variable in research seeking to identify specific effects resulting from television viewing. This research tradition has concentrated on generalizations about psychological processes rather than on group differences. In a major bibliography of almost 3,000 studies of audience behaviour only seven articles on television effects and thirteen on use patterns examined class differences. Joseph Klapper's classic summary of effects research, *The Effects of Mass Communication* (1960) did not even mention class as a factor. The few studies that have considered class found that there were no class differences in children's susceptibility to violence on television, in contrast to the usual stereotype of working class children being more likely to be led into such behaviour.
Studies of family television use patterns have looked more broadly at people's behaviour with the television set. But even in these class is often peripheral. Books on television audiences seldom include social class as a topic in their indexes. One traditional research technique, however, has been to distinguish class differences in television use, usually with an evaluative preference for the patterns established in "higher" classes. Ira Glick and Sidney Levy's *Living with Television* (1962) firmly established the tradition from their 1950s market surveys. The working-class family tended to use TV as a continuing background, with children and parents doing other things while the TV was on. They did not plan viewing, but watched whatever was available at the time they had to watch. They were defined as indiscriminate users, the term suggesting an unhealthy habit. Middle-class families tended to turn on the TV for a specific program and then turn it off. They planned a schedule of activities, including when and what to watch on television. The middle-class pattern was defined as intellectually superior and as approved child-rearing practice. Other researchers adopted this description of working class viewers, confirming popular critics prejudices about the working class, and favouring of the middle class. Recent family communication research has continued to distinguish these class differences, but has avoided the evaluative tone.

Buried within the 1950s and 1960s sociological literature on working-class lifestyle are a few ethnographic observations on working-class uses of and responses to television. These have confirmed the working-class pattern of using the TV as filler and background to family interaction. They also revealed distinctive responses to program content. Working-class men preferred shows featuring a character sympathetic to working-class values. They identified with working-class types even when those types were written as peripheral characters or villains. They contradicted the notion of working-class viewers as passive and gullible.

These results are consistent with effects research which indicated that audiences tend to reject as unrealistic television portrayals that they can compare to their own experience. Thus working-class viewers would not be likely to accept stereotypic portrayals of their class such as described above. Indirect evidence suggests that working-class viewers tended to perceive Archie Bunker as winning arguments with his college-educated son-in-law. In a recent study of soap operas and their viewers (*Remote Control: Television Audiences and Cultural Power*) working-class women viewers of daytime serials rejected the affluent long suffering heroines in favour of villainesses who transgressed feminine norms and thus cast off middle class respectability.

British researchers have given more attention to class [e.g. Piepe]. Cultural studies in particular has popularized the methods of talking with working-class viewers about their reactions to television. Studies of British working-class viewers have painted a more complicated picture of working class viewing than popular stereotypes, encouraged by the portrayals of class on television, would suggest. As with the earlier American studies, working people construct their own alternative readings of television programs.

This wide range of studies over decades provide consistent evidence that working-class viewers are not the passive dupes with their eyes glued to the screen, that popular television criticism has concocted. Nor are they the bumbling, ineffectual clowns often constructed in television comedies. Rather, they use television to their advantage, and interpret content to suit their own needs and interests.

**FURTHER READING**


(Audiences)


