

Allocating Happiness: TV Families and Social Class

by Sari Thomas and Brian P. Callahan

An analysis of prime-time programs dealing with families suggests that they help disseminate the myth that "money doesn't buy happiness."

From Dickens's immortal *A Christmas Carol* to the Hollywood classic *It's a Wonderful Life* or to the Hayward and Gershwin lyrics, "I got plenty o' nothin', and nothin's plenty fo' me," countless mass-mediated "morality plays" have portrayed the alleged virtues of poverty and the corresponding evils of wealth. The publication and dissemination of this myth of the happy poor is central in limiting social mobility (or social change in general) so as to preserve the status quo. That is, the myth can be seen as a device for mitigating resentment of the rich by those lower on the socioeconomic scale: it teaches the poor that being rich does not mean being happy and that harmonious interpersonal relations are a "priceless" possession.

The research reported in this article investigated television's role in the dissemination of this myth. Specifically, through content analysis, we examined prime-time fiction series involving the regular presentation of a family to determine whether or not the fictional family's "happiness" could be systematically related to matters of social class.

The study was based on a probability sample of all ABC, CBS, and NBC prime-time television series focused upon family units and broadcast during the months of January, February, and March, 1980; Febru-

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ary, March, and April, 1979; and March, April, and May, 1978. The sampling guaranteed that every family-focused series aired during each of these periods would be included at least once. In all, 97 individual episodes were analyzed. Since no major differences emerged in considering the variable of month and/or year televised, all 97 episodes are considered as a unified sample. Each program was coded by one member of a team of trained coders. Intercoder reliability exceeded 85 percent on all items.

A series was designated as family-focused if it met two criteria. First, the majority of its continuing (regular) cast had to portray genetically or legally related individuals. Second, its primary “set” and/or dramatic focus had to revolve around the family domicile. Thus, although a father and daughter are regular cast members in “Laverne and Shirley,” this series was excluded because neither the majority of the continuing cast nor the show’s dramatic focus is family-related. Similarly, while “All in the Family” was included, its reformulation as “Archie Bunker’s Place” was not. Only weekly series were considered; hence, pilots, movies, and mini-series were not analyzed.

Although research attention has been paid to social class in the analysis of television drama, such work has largely compared numbers in TV class ranks to their real-life counterparts (cf. 3, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13).¹

¹The interested reader is referred to an article by Gould *et al.* (6), which does address the symbolic consequences of television poverty from a more critical than empirical perspective.

These analyses generally conclude that professionals are over-represented on television and that working-class characters are substantially under-represented (cf. 1, 2).

Research pertaining to television's presentation of dress style (3, 5, 8, 14), speech style (4, 5), and personality characteristics (7, 15) indicates that working-class characters are generally presented as less desirable in terms of personal behavior and style. On this basis, it is often argued that U.S. television drama contains a strong middle-class bias.

When the issues of interpersonal success and happiness are considered, however, another social-class bias emerges, one that deceptively appears to "favor" the working classes.

As will be discussed below, the data from our study indicate that, for the families portrayed on television, money clearly does not buy happiness and that, in fact, relative poverty does. Among the data we collected, a number of variables are most relevant to this thesis.

Social class. A profile of each television family was constructed on the basis of (a) occupation of financially supporting family members, (b) educational levels of adult family members (if available), and (c) family dwelling. On the basis of this profile, each family was designated as belonging to one of four social classes: upper class, e.g., the Ewings of "Dallas" (n = 9); upper-middle class, e.g., the Lawrences of "Family" (n = 37); middle class, e.g., the Cunninghams of "Happy Days" (n = 19); and working class, e.g., the Evanses of "Good Times" (n = 32). In terms of individual characters (i.e., family members) analyzed, 59 were upper-class, 246 were upper-middle-class, 163 were middle-class, and 204 were working-class.

Family sympathy. It was assumed in advance (and subsequently borne out by the analysis) that every episode would have an identifiable main "problem" (plot) and possibly a subplot around which the week's story would revolve. The variable of family sympathy measures the extent to which the given week's "involved" family members were agreeably united in managing or dealing with the main issue. Thus, sympathy could be rated as high, good, fair, or low. Each involved family member was individually rated in terms of these values, and a formula was employed to obtain a rating for the family as a whole. The option "mixed" was added to account for radical deviation among individual family members.

When family sympathy is analyzed in terms of social class, the data show that *all* working-class families exhibited either high or good sympathy levels (with 78.1 percent rated high). In comparison, 88.3 percent of middle-class, 61.8 percent of upper-middle-class, and only 22.2 percent of upper-class families exhibited high or good sympathy levels. In fact, only 11.1 percent of the upper-class families received the

highest sympathy rating, while 22.2 percent of these families were rated as low and 55.6 percent were rated as fair.

Family cooperation. Closely related to the issue of sympathy is the extent to which individual family members pull together when handling the week's main problem. Each regular family member appearing in a given segment was coded as being either (a) informed only—knowing of the main problem but taking no active part, (b) active/neutral—knowing of and operating within the mechanism of the main problem, but neither aiding nor injuring its solution, (c) helpful—knowing of and intentionally attempting to effect positive consequences, (d) detrimental—knowing of and intentionally attempting to effect negative consequences, and (e) not involved—appearing in the segment with no knowledge of or participation in the major plot. For each of these five possible categories, our analysis examined the relationship between social class and the proportion of family members in that category.

The most telling result of this analysis is found in the relationship between proportion of “helpful” family members and social class. Family characters' helpfulness is inversely proportional to “wealth”: on the average, the members of 40 percent of working-class families, 38 percent of middle-class families, 19 percent of upper-middle-class families, and 8 percent of upper-class families were “helpful” ($p < .001$).

Both the “informed only” and the “not involved” categories were also significantly discriminated by social class ($p < .05$ for both). In brief, comparatively smaller proportions of the members of upper- and upper-middle-class families were involved in central problems. Neither the “active/neutral” nor “detrimental” categories exhibited significant differences across social class, although greater percentages of upper- and upper-middle-class family members were rated as detrimental (upper class = 13 percent, upper-middle class = 13 percent, middle class = 8 percent; working class = 6 percent).

Interpersonal character. Every regular family member was rated in terms of his or her personality in each episode analyzed. The rating had two dimensions. First, it was determined whether a character was good (well-intentioned) or bad (ill-intentioned). Second, each character was rated as being either straight (serious), witty (clever, possibly sarcastic), or a joker (clownish). Of the six possible combinations, two—bad/witty and bad/joker—did not occur in the sample. As before, our analysis examines the relationship between social class and the proportion of family members classified in any one of these categories.

The “bias” toward relative poverty is manifested in both “good/straight” and “bad/straight” categories; on the average, 69 percent of the members of working-class, 37 percent of middle-class, 36 percent of upper-middle-class, and 34 percent of upper-class families were classified as “good/straight” ($p < .05$). On the other hand, none of the members of working-class families, but 29 percent of upper-, 14 percent

of middle-, and 5 percent of upper-middle-class family members were classified as "bad/straight" ($p = .001$). Thus, although there were generally fewer "bad" characters than any other type on family-focused shows, the upper class had the greatest relative proportion of "bad" types in its ranks. It might also be noted that the middle-class families had the highest percentage of "good/jokers" (46 percent, $p < .001$), while no significant social class differences emerged with regard to "good/witty" types.

Resolution. Each segment's main problem was evaluated in terms of the extent to which it was resolved by the show's completion. Ratings of either "total resolution" (the main problem no longer exists as such), "partial resolution" (the main problem is substantially alleviated, although aspects of it are implied to linger), or "unresolved" (no substantial alleviation of main problem) were made for each case.²

While the middle- and upper-middle-class families were very similar in terms of "total resolution" (63.2 and 64.9 percent, respectively), a high 84.4 percent of the working-class families and a low 11.1 percent of the upper-class families were thus coded. Partial resolution was reached 33.3 percent of the time for upper-class families, 35.1 percent of the time for those in the upper-middle class, 26.3 percent of the time for those in the middle classes, and 12.5 percent of the time for working-class families. Thus, 55.6 percent of the stories of upper-class families were unresolved, while stories with no resolution occurred 10.5 percent of the time for middle-class families and only 3.1 percent of the time for working-class families. All upper-middle-class families experienced some degree of plot resolution.

Happiness at conclusion of program. Coders rated overall family sentiments at each show's conclusion. Each family could be assessed as either totally happy, resigned (not delighted, but reconciled to whatever transpired in that segment), unhappy, or mixed (at least two of the above values among family members).

²The fact that certain family programs are "serials" might initially be thought to confound resolution-related measurements. However, this "genre" issue may be seen as more powerfully supporting our overall interpretations than confusing them. Specifically, it is not coincidental that the central families in most night-time continuing dramas are upper-class, e.g., the families of "Dallas," "Dynasty," "Falcon Crest," and "Flamingo Road." Similarly, it should not be viewed as peculiar that working-class families are typically contextualized in half-hour situation comedies. In other words, we are arguing that it is not so much genre that influences the results of our analysis, but rather social class that determines genre at the production level.

It might also be interesting to note that it is inaccurate to assume that night-time "serials" are structurally isomorphic with daytime "soap operas"; all serials included in our sample exhibited dramatic structuring more similar to regular evening "series" than to daytime serials, e.g., all had codable episodic plots and resolutions. Most interesting, perhaps, is that in comparing our sample's two serials, "Dallas" (upper-class) and "Knot's Landing" (upper-middle-class), it was found that the latter program exhibited more clearly defined and resolved plots per episode.

Again, the upper-middle and middle-class families were very similar; 51.4 percent of the former and 47.4 percent of the latter were rated as totally happy. Of the working-class families, 74.2 percent achieved total happiness, whereas that rating never applied for upper-class families. The upper-class families, however, did dominate the mixed emotions category (upper class = 55.6 percent, upper-middle class = 35.1 percent, middle class = 36.8 percent, and working class = 22.6 percent).

Interestingly, no upper-class families were found to be resigned to their dramatic fate, whereas resignation appeared as an (proportionately low overall) alternative for all other social classes (upper-middle class = 10.8 percent, middle class = 5.3 percent, and working class = 3.2 percent). Unhappiness was largely in the province of the upper classes (44.4 percent of families), with 2.7 percent of upper-middle-class families and 10.5 percent of those in the middle class involved in generally unhappy conclusions. No working-class families were assessed as being totally unhappy.

Happiness over course of program. An assessment was made comparing the family's initial level of happiness at the episode's opening to its happiness level at the show's end. The family could be judged as ultimately happier, the same (as happy or as unhappy), less happy, or bittersweet (sadder but wiser).

Despite popular fiction's penchant for happy endings, only 22.2 percent of upper-class families were happier or as happy (same) at the end of their episodes. None were happier. Happiness again comforts the working-class families, in that 96.9 percent wound up at least as happy (happier or same) upon resolution. As for the upper-middle and middle-class families, 81.1 percent and 78.9 percent, respectively, were happier or as happy (same) at their shows' conclusions.

While no working-class families emerged as less happy, 15.8 percent of middle-class families, 13.5 percent of upper-middle-class families, and 77.8 percent of upper-class families "lost" happiness over the course of their episodes. The least common ending, bittersweet, was experienced by 3.1 percent of working-class, 5.3 percent of middle-class, 5.4 percent of upper-middle-class, and no upper-class families.

The data from this study clearly indicate that the "money doesn't buy happiness" myth is well served in regular prime-time network television's portrayal of families.

The television family generally enjoys stronger interpersonal harmony, more agreeable personalities, greater felicity and good will, and better problem outcomes when it is located in lower socioeconomic strata. This tendency appears most strikingly in the distinction between working-class families and their unharmonious, unhappy, and problem-riddled upper-class counterparts.

It was mentioned earlier that this working-class "bias" might be considered "deceptive." It is too simple-minded to assume that the obviously positive characteristic of "happiness" fully realizes an obviously positive message. Rather, the "money doesn't buy happiness" myth, in conjunction with two other mass media "messages," may provide the masses with a stabilizing perspective on social mobility. Television's over-representation of moderate-to-greater wealth, exciting lifestyles, and glamorous professions may suggest that "space" in the higher ranks of the socioeconomic structure is more plentiful than reality dictates. This over-representation, combined with the celebration of those who overcome next-to-impossible (real-life) odds and significantly move "upward" (e.g., Horatio Alger heroes, George Jefferson, Rocky), implies that "anyone can make it" in this wide-open arena. However, the companion myth, which is at the center of the present study, suggests: "Just in case you don't make it, don't worry. It's not so great at the top."

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