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## Saturday Morning Children's Television and Depictions of Old Age

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Saturday Morning Children's Television  
and  
Depictions of Old Age

A Thesis

Presented to the  
Department of Communication  
and the Graduate College  
University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

by  
Marigrace H. Powers

May 1992

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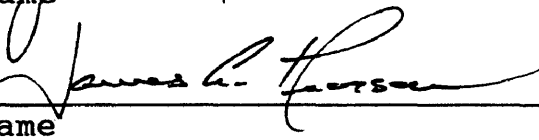
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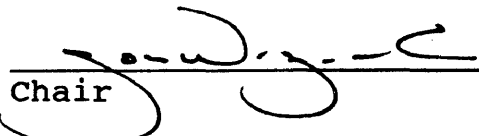
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ABSTRACT.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I      REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.....	5
Print Media	
. Newspapers.....	5
. Magazine Advertisements.....	7
. Magazine Cartoons.....	9
. Magazine Articles.....	10
. Novels.....	10
. Poetry.....	11
. Birthday Cards.....	12
. Children's Basic Readers.....	13
. Children's Picture Books.....	13
. Children's Magazines.....	14
. Children's Fiction.....	15
Television	
. Commercials.....	16
. Soap Operas.....	17
. Prime-Time.....	18
. Children's Programming.....	20
. Children's Weekend Programming.....	21
Summary.....	22
Research Questions.....	24
CHAPTER II      METHOD.....	26
. Sample.....	26
. Coding.....	27
CHAPTER III     RESULTS.....	30
CHAPTER IV      DISCUSSION.....	34
REFERENCES.....	38
APPENDICES      Appendix A: Coding Sheet.....	44
Appendix B: Shows.....	45

## ABSTRACT

As the percentage of people age 65 and older steadily increases in the United States, the "aging of America" and the manner in which the older segment of the population is depicted becomes an increasingly important issue. One nearly inescapable part of our everyday lives--the media (television, newspapers, magazines, and others)--provides a broad field of study for the issue of aging in American society.

The present study investigated the depiction and frequency of appearance of older characters on Saturday morning children's television. Social learning theory posits that children learn from observation--both first-hand and through television. Thus, in order to explore what children might be learning from television, examining the content of shows geared particularly for children is of import.

The sample consisted of 57 Saturday morning children's shows broadcast on the three major television networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) over three consecutive Saturdays in February, 1991. Each show was observed for frequency of appearance of older characters and the positive or negative depiction of older characters. Additional categories of analysis for characters included age, sex, race, major or minor, regular or guest and human or non-human distinctions. The plot-type

of each show (adventure, drama, problem-solving, day-in-the-life, mystery, other) was also observed and coded.

Although this study was not an exact replication, an opportunity for an interesting comparison of data existed. In 1981, Bishop and Krause (1984) sampled and analyzed 24 hours of Saturday morning children's television from the three major networks.

In the ten years between the samples, the percentage of old people in the United States has steadily increased. However, this increase was not reflected in the depictions of older characters in children's Saturday morning television. The percentage of older characters in Bishop and Krause's (1984) study was 7%, while the percentage in this study was 5%. Also, during the ten-year span, senior advocacy organizations such as AARP have grown larger and more visible and influential in speaking out against discrimination of the elderly. While Bishop and Krause (1984) found a fairly equal balance of positive and negative portrayals of the elderly (52% positive and 48% negative), the present study found a difference of 86% positive and 14% negative. Chi-square analysis revealed this difference was significant at the .001 level. One possible explanation for this difference could be, in part, due to the efforts of senior advocacy organizations. Another could be economics--the growth in consumer power the elderly as a group enjoy.

## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE I	-- PLOT TYPE.....	30
TABLE II	-- CHARACTERS BY RACE.....	30
TABLE III	-- CHARACTERS BY SEX.....	31
TABLE IV	-- CHARACTERS BY AGE.....	32
TABLE V	-- ATTRIBUTES OF OLD AGE.....	33



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## INTRODUCTION

In 1975, Harris and Associates published the results of a nation-wide poll conducted for the National Council on Aging. The results showed that prejudice against the elderly and ageist stereotypes are widespread in our society. Other researchers have found that ageist stereotypes permeate our everyday lives from the jokes we tell (Palmore, 1971) to the birthday cards we buy (Demos & Jache, 1981) to the television programs we watch (Aronoff, 1974; Bishop & Krause, 1984; Kubey, 1980; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli & Morgan, 1980; Greenberg, Korzenny & Atkin, 1979; Northcott, 1975).

Prejudice against the elderly, called ageism, is believed to arise from fears and misconceptions about what happens to the body and mind in old age (Hooyman & Kiyak, 1988). Negative misconceptions and fears lead to negative attitudes or stereotypes about old age. "Stereotypes are generalized and simplified beliefs about a group of people or objects and they may be positive or negative" (Hooyman & Kiyak, 1988, p. 525).

Ageism is generally considered a negative stereotype--negative characteristics are attributed to all old people. Just as with racism and sexism, "ageism attributes certain characteristics to all members of a group solely because of

a characteristic they share; in this case, their age" (Hooyman & Kiyak, 1988, p. 2).

By stereotyping, a person is indiscriminately ignoring the "characteristics of the specific individual in favor of some misplaced and overly generalized characteristic assigned to the entire group of people" (Fischer, 1987, p. 163). An often unfortunate result of stereotyping is that it serves as a substitute for assessing each person individually (Fischer, 1987).

Study of the prevailing stereotypes and attitudes toward the elderly is important for several reasons. First, social policies and institutions can be implemented and designed on the basis of inaccurate, but widespread, beliefs about the elderly (Brubaker & Powers, 1976; Butler, 1969; Green, 1981). Second, not only do attitudes and stereotypes influence social policy, they can influence the way in which we behave toward the elderly, even influencing whether or not we choose to have contact with old people (Hooyman & Kiyak, 1988). Finally, stereotypes have the potential to influence the self-esteem and self-concept of the elderly themselves and the way they act toward others (Puglisi & Jackson, 1978; Rodin & Langer, 1980; Ward, 1977).

In many ways, the media perpetuate stereotypes and negative attitudes toward the elderly (Buchholz & Bynum,

1982; Gerbner, et al., 1980; Kubey, 1980; Rubin, 1982, 1988). Powell and Williamson (1985) consider the omission of old people in media implies that they lack value. On a more positive side, however, Hooyman and Kiyak (1988) believe that the "powerful impact of the media . . . can be used to dispel myths about aging as well as to create such myths" (p. 538).

While it is important that all media are examined for ageism, the present research looks at one part of the media --children's Saturday morning television programs. It is particularly important to closely examine those media to which children are exposed and which may be influencing their ideas of societal norms and roles because, "[t]he media play an important role in shaping children's attitudes and in introducing them to the norms, roles, and values of society" (Almerico & Fillmer, 1988, p. 16). Observational learning, "in the absence of any apparent reinforcers," is demonstrated by children who observe television and then imitate what they have seen or who show a change in cognitive skills because of what they have seen (Hetherington & Parke, 1986, p. 9).

This observation and subsequent imitation or learning is referred to as social learning theory. Under this theory, "children learn not only through classical and

operant conditioning but also by observing and imitating" (Hetherington & Parke, 1986, p. 7).

One example of this theory is demonstrated in a study of "Sesame Street" and its affect on preschoolers (Ball & Bogatz, 1972). The comparison tests done with children before and six months after viewing the show revealed a marked improvement in cognitive skills. They also found that the amount of viewing was positively related to the improvement in cognitive skills. These results show that children learn from television viewing just as they do from first-hand interaction. It is because of this observational learning that the content of children's television should be closely monitored by all.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Review of Related Literature

Foundation research on media and aging goes back at least thirty years when much of the data concerned the attitudes of elderly people toward the media and their leisure-time use of media (Rubin, 1988). Research on how the media portray the elderly began not long after this, and has shown that "media depictions produce stereotypes of aging that deprive elders of social roles and social status" (Rubin, 1988, p. 155).

The following review of literature on media and aging looks specifically at how aging and the elderly are treated in print media (newspapers, magazine advertisements, magazine cartoons, magazine articles, novels, poetry, birthday cards and children's literature) and in television (television commercials, daytime television, prime-time television and children's television).

#### Print Media

Newspapers. In an examination of ten daily metropolitan newspapers, Broussard, Blackmon, Blackwell, Smith and Hunt (1980) found that in proportion to the number of elderly people (those over 65) living in the United States, the amount of space devoted to articles about the elderly is low. However, of those articles dealing with the elderly or aging, only four percent were written in a

negative tone while the majority, 65%, were neutral and the rest, 31%, positive.

A more recent and definitive analysis of newspapers' treatment of the elderly was done by Buchholz and Bynum (1982). In examining 1,703 newspaper articles concerning an older individual or issues on aging from the New York Times and the Daily Oklahoman in 1970 and 1978, they found that 56% of the articles portrayed a neutral image of the elderly, 30% portrayed a positive image and 14% negative. Overall, the number of negative stories was higher in 1978 in comparison to the number of negative stories in 1970. The neutral or positive articles, however, received better "play" (higher place of importance based on location, headline size, etc.) than the negative stories.

In both studies, the number of neutral articles outnumbered either the positive or negative--possibly signifying the desire of the publications to remain nonpartisan or objective. On the other hand, Buchholz and Bynum (1982) point out that, although the number of neutral articles was high, "Where both newspapers failed was in the thoroughness of their coverage of the aging story" (p. 87). Of the 1,703 articles in their sample, only 50 dealt with unique problems faced by the aged. Since a quarter or more of each of the samples was composed of obituaries, Buchholz

and Bynum suggest that "the surest way to get into the news columns was to die" (p. 86).

Focusing only on Sunday editions of 22 newspapers published in different cities across the United States, Wass, Almerico, Campbell and Tatum (1984) also found that the majority of articles were event rather than issue oriented, although metropolitan newspapers were more likely to contain issue oriented articles. Overall, age-related articles covered only an average of .87% of the news space in the 254 Sunday papers examined.

Magazine Advertisements. The number of older people portrayed in magazine advertisements is also low in proportion to the actual percentage of the elderly population in the United States. In an analysis of 6,785 advertisements that were taken from seven national magazines published in 1977, Gantz, Gartenberg and Rainbow (1980) found that only six percent of all ads containing people had at least one elderly person in them. Of this six percent, 74% were male and only 26% female.

In 1982, Kvasnicka, Beymer and Perloff duplicated the Gantz, et al. (1980) study, but included every 1980 issue of four magazines explicitly geared toward the elderly as well as four national magazines that reported the highest readership among individuals over age 65. Their results show that, of the national magazine advertisements



containing people, eight percent were elderly (only two percent higher than the amount found by Gantz, et al. in 1980).

In order of frequency, the national magazines studied by Gantz, et al. (1980) included elderly people in ads for corporate image, liquor and travel. In the Kvasnicka, et al. (1982) study, the elderly appeared most frequently in ads for easy lift chairs, food products and beauty aids. Of the magazines published specifically for the elderly, 73% of all ads containing people featured an elderly person. These ads, most frequently for travel, drugs and easy lift chairs, were favorable.

In a separate study, England, Kuhn and Gardner (1981) looked at 2,200 magazine advertisements which appeared in Vogue, Ladies' Home Journal, Ms., Playboy, and Time over a ten year span from 1960 to 1979. The majority of characters appearing in these ads were under age 30, while less than two percent were over age 60. Over time, from 1960 to 1979, the emphasis on youth grew as the average age portrayed became younger (from 25.7 to 24.8 years of age). England, Kuhn and Gardner (1981) conclude that "the choice of youthful portrayals for ads reflects and perpetuates a positive evaluation of youth and a deprecation of aging" (p. 471).

At least one study (Kaiser & Chandler, 1984) found that the response of the elderly to this accentuation of youth in advertising is negative and arouses feelings of alienation.

A study with a different focus on magazine advertisements (Hollenshead and Ingersoll, 1982) looked specifically at the portrayal of middle-aged and older women. They found that in 3,482 ads in Time, Good Housekeeping, and the Journal of the American Medical Association from 1967 to 1977 older women (age 56 and over) appeared in 30 ads (.86%), while middle-aged women (age 36 to 55) appeared in 122 and young women (age 18-35) in 743. Older women were more likely to appear in the medical journal than in the others. On average, readers can expect to see an older woman in a magazine ad only about once every two issues.

Magazine Cartoons. In 1979, Smith analyzed more than 2,000 cartoons that appeared in eight major magazines between 1970 and 1979 and found that once again the elderly were underrepresented (only four percent of the cartoons analyzed contained elderly people). Twenty-six percent of those portrayed as elderly were also portrayed negatively. In comparison, only 12% of the adult cartoon characters and five percent of the child cartoon characters were portrayed negatively. However, the highest category for each of the three age groups was the neutral portrayal. Negative themes

concerning the elderly that appeared most often were related to sexual dysfunction and ultra-conservatism.

**Magazine Articles.** Nussbaum and Robinson (1986) examined articles in popular magazines published between 1970 and 1979 and found that 50% of the articles portrayed the elderly negatively (as being slow, sad, senile, lonely or cantankerous). In addition, from 1970 to 1979, rather than improving, the negative articles became more negative. On the other hand, 35% of the articles portrayed the elderly as "wise, loving, talkative, trustworthy, cheerful, and kind" (Nussbaum, Thompson & Robinson, 1989, p. 62).

Shuerman, Eden and Peterson (1977) reviewed fiction in nine women's magazines published in 1975 (Cosmopolitan, Family Circle, Good Housekeeping, etc.). They found that, overall, descriptions of the elderly were positive but not realistic. Instead, they resembled the readers of the magazines.

Examining Time magazine articles from 1978 only, Kent and Shaw (1980), discovered little age stereotyping of named individuals. Of 599 named individuals only 81 were coded as age stereotyped. One common stereotype was the aging of athletes who, in their twenties or thirties, were referred to as "growing old" (Kent & Shaw, 1980, p. 599).

**Novels.** Of the novels published in the United States between 1950 and 1975, 87 featured a protagonist over the

age of 60 (Sohnngen, 1977). Most of these were written after 1965, which Sohnngen (1977) theorizes "may be evidence of the United States' genuine and growing concern for its aging population" or evidence that the publishing industry has recognized its market (p. 70). A broad grouping by subject revealed that these novels cover the issues of institutionalization, retirement, individual isolation, segregated living and power struggles between generations. Although the majority of characters are white and of middle-class standing, they "avoid blatant soap-opera plot cliches" and "present vivid characters" (Sohnngen, 1977, p. 72).

Of the novels published between 1931 and 1970, Back (1978) found that the proportion of scenes containing old people increased from 9.7% in the 1930s to 13.7% in the 1970s. The aged characters were most likely to be found in outdoor, rural scenes in a group of people rather than indoor, urban scenes and alone.

Poetry. Together, Sohnngen and Smith (1978) examined images of old age in poetry. They found that poets' portraits of aging were "overwhelmingly negative" emphasizing loss and decline rather than gain (Sohnngen & Smith, 1978, p. 182). The negatives centered around the physical losses associated with old age, while the few positive aspects concern pleasant remembrances, wisdom, love of beauty and tranquility.

In 1980, Clark examined 120 poems on aging written between 1948 and 1978 by 22 American poets age 60 and above. Seventeen of these poets were male, five female. Clark came up with four categories of poem themes: "a vigor beyond youth," connoting some action by the aged; "self-grown and shuttered," focusing on losses; "in the time left," a time of vision and life review; "too old to love and still to love," dealing with love and relationships. These poems, Clark (1980) believed, illustrate "a great river of strength among our elders" (p. 191).

**Birthday Cards.** The two most unique studies on media portrayals of aging looked at commercial birthday cards--a "recreational" type of print media (Demos & Jache, 1981; Dillon & Jones, 1981). While one study was based on 195 humorous birthday cards with aging themes (Demos & Jache, 1981), the other looked at 65 cards with aging themes (Dillon & Jones, 1981). The latter divided the messages on the cards into six categories:

loss (56%), age concealment (25%), sympathy or respect for elders (3%), not showing your age (6%), things getting better with age (6%), and age as a matter of mind (3%) (Dillon & Jones, 1981, p. 81).

The early stages of Demos and Jache's (1981) research involved dividing the card messages into positive/negative/neutral categories. On those cards where there was consensus, 80% were negative and 20% were positive. They

also established themes of physical and mental loss, age concealment, age boundaries and age as a state of mind. They conclude that messages of aging on humorous birthday cards appear to be reflective of popular stereotypes.

**Children's Basic Readers.** Three studies on children's basic readers (Kingston & Drotter, 1981; Meadows & Fillmer, 1987; Robin, 1977) have found that the elderly are not represented proportionally, yet they are normally referred to in a positive manner. Even so, Robin (1977) complains that elderly characters are not fully developed, appearing neutral and bland. Kingston and Drotter (1981) found that older women are portrayed as bespectacled, wearing aprons and sitting in rocking chairs and older men are portrayed as bald, smoking pipes and wearing suspenders. In contrast, Meadows and Fillmore (1987) found that the elderly assumed major roles and appeared intelligent, healthy, pleasant and "dressed in accordance with the styles and customs of the setting" (p. 90).

**Children's Picture Books.** In looking at children's picture books, Hurst (1981) revealed that women of all ages are underrepresented and portrayed in a sexist manner in limited occupations, social roles and activities--shown most often doing household chores. Storck and Cutler (1977), who analyzed children's illustrated fiction, also found women to be underrepresented and the books in general to be

unreflective of society. Their image was a "limited and sad one" (Hurst, 1981, p. 141). The majority of older characters are not shown as active or employed. They are referred to in the narrative as "funny, small, little, grumpy, lonely, poor and weak" (Hurst, 1981, p. 141). Or, they are presented merely as "a function of the child's needs rather than as real individuals with whom to interact" (Storck & Cutler, 1977).

Ansello (1977) found no overt signs of discrimination in children's picture books, but determined that "what makes many portrayals racist, sexist, or ageist is the repetition of the same types of behaviors over and over again to the point of limiting, denying, or excluding other potentials for characters of a given race, sex, or age" (p. 255). The repetitious, mundane behaviors, absence of creativity and superficiality of older characters are what Ansello (1977) found most striking about these picture books.

Children's Magazines. The elderly were not found to be "victims of blatant discrimination" in children's magazines (Almerico & Fillmer, 1988, p. 15). However, there are still subtle hints of prejudice in their depictions. Older characters were underdeveloped and not representative of their actual number in society. It was concluded that children's magazines provide an inaccurate but positive picture of the elderly.

Children's Fiction. The remaining studies on children's print media looked generally at fictional literature. Two such studies, both published in 1977 (Barnum; Storey), found that the elderly are portrayed negatively, in shallow and unrealistic ways. Women were underrepresented in Barnum's study (1977) and the elderly in general played insignificant roles.

In contrast, two other studies (Blue, 1978; Seltzer & Atchley, 1971) resulted in generally positive conclusions. In reviewing children's literature from various points in time from 1870 to 1960, Seltzer and Atchley (1971) found that there were fewer negative depictions of the elderly than they had expected. Blue (1978), using a sample of what she called "realistic fiction for children," found that the elderly were portrayed accurately, adequately and in diverse lifestyles and varying behaviors.

Two studies which looked specifically at adolescent literature (Peterson & Eden, 1977; Peterson & Karnes, 1976) discovered that women again were underrepresented and shown mostly in roles as wives, mothers and grandmothers. Proportionally, the total number of all elderly characters was similar to the number of elderly actually living in the U.S. Most of the older characters were not developed fully, existing only on the periphery of the story-line. The elderly were not generally portrayed as senile, ill or as



grandparents. Real problems facing older people were not addressed.

### Television

Commercials. A random sample of 100 commercials that aired in 1973 revealed that the majority of persons appearing in TV commercials were young or of celebrity status (Francher, 1973). Francher, who analyzed these commercials, believes that they demonstrate a widespread "'youth complex,' a system of messages accentuating youth, action-orientation, and sensory gratification" (p. 253).

Harris and Feinberg (1977) did a study of television shows and commercials selected randomly over a six week period in 1976 and also found that youth and action were featured over age. Of the 80 commercials they analyzed, 10.6% of the total characters analyzed were age 60 or older. These characters were generally less active and had more health problems than their younger counterparts.

In analyzing 136 commercials that aired in the summer of 1981, Hiemstra and his associates (1983) found that only 11 contained one or more persons judged to be 60 or older. Those elderly who did appear in commercials were mostly young-old rather than persons who are and look very old. Promotions involving older characters were for health products, food, consumer services and household products. More than 14% of the commercials were judged as glorifying

youth, 7% denigrated old people or aging and only .7% depicted an "overt positive view of being old" (Hiemstra, Goodman, Middlemiss, Vosco and Ziegler, 1983, p. 119).

Soap Operas. The daytime television portrayal of the elderly has been examined by both Elliott (1984), who did content analysis on four weeks of daytime television serials broadcast in 1979, and by Cassata, Anderson and Skill (1980), who analyzed daytime serials for two weeks in the summer of 1978. In general, persons between the ages of 20 and 59 made up the bulk of characters, while those over age 60 comprised less than nine percent of the total characters on daytime soap operas. Although elderly characters were not the center of serial stories, they also were not overtly passive or emotional. Elliott (1984) concluded that, overlooking serious underrepresentation, "the myths of aging--unproductivity, disengagement, inflexibility, senility, and serenity--do not apply in describing older characters in daytime serials" (p. 632). Cassata, et al. (1980) found that the older person on daytime soaps is generally attractive, employed in an important position and lives independently.

In a sample of soap operas from 1973, Downing (1974) found that female characters on soap operas, in contrast to those on prime-time, are represented in larger numbers and those who have been characters for 20 years or more remain

"beautiful, effective and needed" rather than growing old and unneeded in a negative way (p. 134).

Ramsdell (1973) analyzed soap operas for their possible influence on family behavior and types of role models displayed. It was observed that the world of the soap opera is unlike the real world of society. The elderly, rather than being institutionalized are "valued advisors-in-residence . . . reminders of family structure in extended family days" (Ramsdell, 1973, p. 302). Ramsdell expresses concern about the typical soap opera's distorted picture of family life and its effects on young children who are often incidental viewers. "Since much learning important in the future of the child takes place in the first four or five years, the passive viewing of the young child is important" (Ramsdell, 1973, p. 300).

Prime-Time. The bulk of research on the portrayal of the elderly in prime-time television (Aronoff, 1974; Gerbner, et al., 1980; Greenberg, et al., 1979; Harris & Feinberg, 1977; Northcott, 1975; Peterson, 1973) is not as favorable as its daytime counterpart. Aronoff (1974), who studied 2,741 characters in prime-time network drama between 1969 and 1971, found that only 4.9% were classified as elderly. He also found that aging in prime-time shows was "associated with increasing evil, failure, and unhappiness" (Aronoff, 1974, p. 87).

Similarly, Northcott (1975), who analyzed 464 prime-time characters appearing in shows during one week in 1974, found a disproportionately low number of elderly characters--1.5%. Northcott (1975) also found that negative comments about aging outnumbered positive comments three to one.

The results of Peterson's (1973) study of 30 prime-time TV shows indicate that the viewer could expect to see an older person during only 11.47% of the total programming time.

In a longitudinal study spanning ten years, 1969-1978, Gerbner and associates (1980) examined over 16,000 prime-time characters. The percentage of elderly characters found in this study was low in proportion to their actual representation in the United States' population.

Greenberg, et al. (1979) looked at more than 3,500 characters appearing over three seasons--1975, 1976, 1977--during prime-time and Saturday morning programming. They found that only three percent, or about 100 characters, could be categorized as elderly (age 65 and above). The older characters, in contrast to other age groups, were likely to appear in situation comedies, commit fewer acts of physical aggression and more frequently commit acts of verbal aggression.

In addition to disproportionate representation and negative portrayals, each of these studies on prime-time television (Aronoff, 1974; Gerbner, et al., 1980; Greenberg, et al., 1979; Harris & Feinberg, 1977; Northcott, 1975; Peterson, 1973) found that elderly female characters suffer the greatest loss of status. Northcott (1975) stated that, "In sum, on TV, the mature adult male is the dominant figure both in terms of relative frequency and in terms of competency" (p. 186). The female television character was found not only to age earlier and faster, but to fail more often than succeed (Aronoff, 1974).

Children's Programming--International Study. Holtzman and Akiyama (1985) conducted an interesting study comparing the ten most popular television shows of children in the United States (in 1981) with the top ten shows chosen by children in Japan. Of the ten shows chosen by American children, all were shows made originally for prime-time audiences rather than specifically for children (e.g.: "Dukes of Hazard," "Greatest American Hero," "CHiPs," "Happy Days," "Laverne and Shirley," "Mork and Mindy," "Diff'rent Strokes," "Bosom Buddies," "Little House on the Prairie," "Love Boat"). On the other hand, only two of the ten shows chosen by Japanese children were not designed specifically for children. Surprisingly, only about half as many characters over age 60 were identified on the Japanese shows

as on the American shows. This is "contrary to what might be expected given commonly-held beliefs regarding the cultural importance of older persons in non-Western cultures" (Holtzman & Akiyama, 1985, p. 65). Still, the percentage of older characters (age 60 and above) on these shows (9.4%) was low for the actual percentage in the United States (15.9%). In both cultures the number of women depicted, especially older women, was grossly unrepresentative of society. Most of the older characters on shows in both cultures were not regulars, thus they did not play major roles. The researchers concluded that according to television in both cultures the world is a place where the male adult dominates everything.

Children's Weekend Programming. In addition to studying prime-time, as discussed above, both Gerbner and associates (1980) and Greenberg and associates (1979) also studied children's weekend programs. They found again that, compared to the national population, the elderly are underrepresented in children's programming--four percent of all females appearing in cartoons were over age 65 and two percent of all males were over age 65 (Gerbner, et al. 1980). Greenberg, et al. (1979) found that about half of all characters appearing on Saturday morning shows were age 20 or under.

Levinson (1975-76), who looked at children's Saturday morning shows broadcast by the major networks in 1973, remarked on the trend toward shows featuring more human children and adults than the older shows ("Bugs Bunny" or the "Roadrunner" for example, which are still televised on some channels). Levinson also found that the number of female characters and the variety of careers which they held were low. Females most often were depicted as housewives, secretaries and teachers.

Looking at children's Saturday morning programs broadcast in 1981, Bishop and Krause (1984) found that only 7% of the main characters fit the category of old. They found that one in five cartoons contained some incidental reference to age or aging but the majority of these references were negative. Those characters categorized as young had a disproportionate share of positive characters. Ninety-five percent of all young characters were categorized as positive while only 5% were negative. They concluded that old characters and aging, generally, are absent from children's Saturday morning television. The few incidental references which do occur are negative (Bishop and Krause, 1984).

### Summary

From the preceding literature review, three general conclusions become apparent. First, the quantity or number

of older persons in most media is low. In fact, in proportion to their actual percentage in the United States population, the elderly are seriously underrepresented by the media. Second, the majority of elderly characters are qualitatively unflattering and stereotypical (Rubin, 1988). Third, media portrayals of older women (with the exception of soap operas) are especially negative and ageist. Thus, according to the bulk of research on the media and the elderly, the elderly suffer unequal representation and more negative or neutral portrayals (especially females) than positive.



## Research Questions

The present research specifically examines the portrayal of the elderly and aging on children's Saturday morning television programs. Although this study is not an exact replication of the work of Bishop and Krause (1984), the similarity is close enough to warrant a comparison of some of the findings. As the collection and analysis of data was done exactly 10 years apart (1981 and 1991), an opportunity for analyzing change over time is offered.

Bishop and Krause (1984) found only 7% of all the main characters in their study fit the category of old. They studied Saturday morning television programs broadcast in 1981, and at that time the percentage of persons in the United States over the age of 65 was roughly 11.3% (U.S. Census--1980, 1983). Since the time of their study, the percentage of persons over age 65 in the United States has risen to 12.5% (The Sourcebook, 1990). Has this increase been reflected in this particular medium or has it remained stagnant? Thus, the first research question:

**What change, if any, occurred in the percentage of older characters on Saturday morning children's television programs from 1981 to 1991?**

According to the literature review above, media portrayals of the elderly, as well as being low in number, are low in quality--older characters are usually portrayed negatively. This phenomena, however, is expected to change. Atchley (1985) observed that already "media portrayals of aging are moving in a positive direction" (p. 265). Kubey's 1980 review and Rubin's 1982 review of television and aging also predict this trend to occur.

Bishop and Krause (1984) found that, of all older characters (n=25) on Saturday morning programs broadcast in 1981, 52% were labeled as positive and 48% were labeled as negative. The second research question, therefore, is:

**What change, if any, occurred in the depiction of older characters on Saturday morning children's television programs from 1981 to 1991?**

## CHAPTER TWO

### Method

#### Sample

The sample consists of 36 hours of children's television programs (excluding commercials) broadcast between 7:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. (Central Standard Time) on the three major networks: CBS, NBC and ABC. The viewing times and networks in this study duplicate those used by Bishop and Krause (1984). However, the total number of hours viewed in this study is 36, while Bishop and Krause (1984) viewed 24 hours. This allowed each program to be viewed three times.

With 19 shows appearing on one Saturday, the total shows viewed over three Saturdays is 57. Over one year, approximately 52 Saturdays, the total possible shows is 988. However, as television programming is done in seasons, new shows are made only about half the year while in the other half re-runs are broadcast. Thus, the 57 shows in this study are sampled from approximately 494 total shows. As February has traditionally been the time of a "sweep"--a national survey of television viewing--the networks show few or no re-runs during this month. Rather than randomly selecting Saturdays through the year, this sample was collected over three weekends in February and, therefore, it ensures and represents "fresh" shows--no duplications.

### Coding

Specific information about each cartoon was systematically observed and assigned to a pre-established category. The main units observed include: attributes of significant characters who contribute to the plot, plot-types and positive/negative attributes of older characters. (See Appendix A for an example of the coding sheet used.)

The first attribute category observed was age. The "child" category includes any character from infants to teenagers (0-19 years old). "Young adult" category includes ages 20-30. The "adult" category includes ages approximately 31-64. Each of these categories were determined based on appearance, voice, type of activity engaged in and any mention of age. The final category, "old," includes any character which dialog indicates is over age 65 who has wrinkled skin, gray hair, failing voice or is mentioned as being retired or a grandparent. However, as Gantz, et al. (1980) pointed out, not all grandparents are 65 or older and all those with wrinkled skin are not always 65 or older. Therefore, these criteria will be evaluated in reference to each other.

A second category under the character attribute heading includes the sex of the character. A third includes human/non-human distinctions. This, of course, was determined by appearance and the above criteria were applied

for determining age of non-human as well as human characters. Where determinable and appropriate, categorizations for race were also made. Also, a distinction was made as to whether the character appeared regularly or was a guest on the sponsoring show. Coders recorded the character's significance (major, minor role) as well. Major and minor characters were defined by their degree of importance to the story. Briefly appearing background characters not essential to the story were not included in the study.

Each older character was analyzed as positive or negative, depending on behaviors. The first of these was determined by the character's degree of helping or altruistic behaviors versus threatening and non-helping behaviors. Behaviors which benefit the situation or other characters or were not harmful were evaluated as positive. Behaviors which were harmful or malicious were categorized as negative.

Plot outlines were categorized as adventure, problem-solving, mystery, drama, day-in-the-life or "other."

The researcher viewed and coded all 36 hours of programming. A second coder, a student of sociology who was trained to observe the cartoons and categorize the data, viewed six hours of programming (two hours from each network selected randomly). A comparison of the coders' data was

used to determine intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability, or reproducibility "refers to the extent to which content classification produces the same results when the same text is coded by **more than one coder**" (Weber, 1985, p. 17). The simplest test of reliability for two observers categorizing in a nominal system is provided by Cohen (1960). Cohen's Kappa calculates the degree of agreement between two observers beyond what would be expected by chance. Cohen's formula, below, (Bowers & Courtright, 1984) where  $P_o$  is the observed proportion of agreement and  $P_c$  is the chance proportion of agreement revealed an intercoder reliability of .92 for the positive/negative coding of old characters (assuming chance representation would be equal).

$$K = \frac{P_o - P_c}{1 - P_c}$$

Intercoder reliability (again assuming chance representation to be equal) was found to be .73 for the category of age.

The results of each show's analysis were totaled. The frequency of portrayals of older characters was compared with the frequency of portrayals of other age categories. The number of positive or negative portrayals by older characters was totaled.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Results

A total of 57 Saturday morning television shows with 597 characters was analyzed. The majority of these shows were animated (88%) rather than non-animated (32%)--there is some overlap as some shows had segments that were both animated and non-animated. Table I indicates the plot types of the shows. The biggest percentage (40%) were problem-solving plots with adventure and day-in-the-life plots closely represented (28% and 25%, respectively). The remainder, 5%, did not fall into any of the pre-assigned plot categories.

TABLE I  
PLOT TYPE N = 57

Adventure	Drama	Mystery	Prob-solving	Day-in-life	Other
28%	0%	0%	40%	25%	5%

Of the total 597 characters, 64% were categorized as major and 36% as minor. Overall, there were more non-human characters (53%) than human characters (47%). This accounts for the high percentage of "other" (53%) when characters were categorized by race. (See Table II.)

TABLE II  
CHARACTERS BY RACE N = 597

Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	Nat. American	Other
0%	10%	1%	36%	0%	53%

When all 597 characters were categorized by sex, an amazing discrepancy in representation is apparent. While 78% of the characters were male, only 22% were female. (See Table III.) With a Chi-square value of 184, this difference is significant at the  $p < .001$  level. On the other hand, a discrepancy in the percentage of regular versus guest characters is not as shocking (72% versus 28%). While the percentage of males and females would be expected to balance, one would naturally assume for continuity from one show to the next that the percentage of regular characters would be greater than the percentage of guests.

TABLE III  
CHARACTERS BY SEX      N = 597

Males	Females
78%	22%

The answers to the research questions are as follows:

**What change, if any, occurred in the percentage of older characters on Saturday morning children's television programs from 1981 to 1991?**

Bishop and Krause (1984) reported that for the Saturday morning television shows they analyzed in 1981, of the total characters, only 7% (25 characters) were categorized as old. In the 1991 shows analyzed in this research, only 5% (28 characters) were categorized as old. (See Table IV.) For



this study, Chi-square analysis of characters by age revealed a value of 306 with significance of  $p < .001$ .

For the purpose of comparison, the age categories of young adult and adult can be collapsed for this sample to one category classified as adult. The "young" category of Bishop and Krause (1984)--characters who were teenagers or younger--is comparable to the "child" category of the present study (characters age 0-19). The old category in each study defines characters who have wrinkled skin, gray hair, failing or mature voices. The adult category in Bishop and Krause's (1984) study defines those with mature voices and appearances while the categories of young adult and adult in the present study also were defined by voice, appearance, activity engaged in and any mention of age (20-64 years old). Collapsing these categories and comparing the samples reveals a Chi-square of 740.3 with a significance of  $p < .001$ .

TABLE IV  
CHARACTERS BY AGE      N = 597

Child (0-19)	Young Adult (20-30)	Adult (31-64)	Old (65+)
14%	29%	52%	5%

What change, if any, occurred in the depiction of older characters on Saturday morning children's television programs from 1981 to 1991?

Bishop and Krause (1984) reported in their sample of 1981 Saturday morning television shows that 52% of all older characters were depicted positively and 48% were depicted negatively. In the present research, the total percentage of older characters depicted positively was 86% and the percentage depicted negatively was 14%. (See Table V.) Within this sample, the difference in the percentage of positively depicted older characters was significant at the .001 level with a Chi-square value of 14. Between samples, from 1981 to 1991, the Chi-square value for positive/negative older characters was 14.32--also significant ( $p < .001$ ).

TABLE V  
ATTRIBUTES OF OLD CHARACTERS      N = 28

Positive	Negative
86%	14%

Determining character depiction in this sample was not difficult, as "bad" characters were blatantly bad and "good" characters were blatantly good. The plots were not elaborate or complex. Good and evil were easily recognized.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Discussion

The present research sought to answer questions about change in Saturday morning children's television programming from 1981 to 1991. One of the research questions looked at change in the representation of the elderly in these shows and found none. The other research question looked at change in the depiction (positive or negative) of old characters. Change here was very evident--the percentage of positive portrayals of older characters was higher. The results could be described as "quality not quantity" when it comes to older characters in children's Saturday morning television.

As with many other studies cited in the literature review, the proportion of older characters does not reflect the proportion of the elderly in the United States (Almerico & Fillmer, 1988; Gerbner, et al. 1980; Holtzman & Akiyama, 1985; Northcott, 1975). Perhaps expecting such representation is not logical as the target audience for these shows is children. On the other hand, then, why is the most represented age category adult rather than children? (See Table IV.) One possible reason could be the high percentage of problem-solving plots for these shows and that adult characters enable the writers more variety

within these plots than child or older characters. (See Table I.)

While the review of literature indicates that the media portrayals of the elderly are more often negative than positive, this research found the greatest percentage of older characters to be portrayed positively (86%) rather than negatively (14%). This trend toward more positive portrayals of older characters was predicted by several researchers (Atchley, 1985; Kubey, 1980; Rubin, 1982). This could be due in part because of lobbying groups such as the Gray Panthers and AARP, but also could be indicative of the growing awareness of the elderly as an active, powerful group in our society--a group that we don't just see disappearing into the cracks but a group that is highly visible.

Another finding of this study that is supported by past research discussed in the literature review is the underrepresentation of females at all ages (Holtzman & Akiyama, 1985; Hurst, 1981; Levinson, 1975-76; Storck & Cutler, 1977). With males comprising 78% of the total characters and females comprising only 22%, there is a little less than a one in four chance of a character being female. Such a gross underrepresentation is indeed worthy of note and future study. If children learn from viewing

television (Ball & Bogatz, 1972), what are they learning from television shows which are dominated by males?

Another area for further research is a more in-depth character study. While the number of positive older characters in this study greatly outweighed the number of negative, the older characters did not play well-developed, well-rounded characters. As Storck and Cutler (1977) remarked in their research, the older characters were merely a function of the needs of the major characters and not really presented as individuals with whom one would interact on an ongoing basis. For example, in one episode of "Garfield and Friends" a wise old man appears not as an individual with needs, thoughts, and problems of his own. Rather, he appears solely for the benefit and guidance of the main character. He is a "guru" who teaches the main character the path to natural existence. While the depiction of the character is positive, it is not a depiction of a well-rounded character.

Other examples of older characters who played the role of "gurus" include Splinter in "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles," Blue in "Kid 'n Play" and the Wizard in the "Wizard of Oz." Again, while each character was depicted positively, they appeared solely and only for the benefit of the main characters and not individually as well-rounded characters on their own.

The continued study of media portrayals of the elderly is important. The number of individuals in the United States who will be over age 65 in the year 2000 is predicted to be 34.9 million (AARP, 1989). The "aging of America" and all the concerns and questions that will come with it will continue to be an issue of importance in all areas of our society for some time--from media to healthcare to economics.

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## APPENDIX A

## Coding Sheet

Date of show \_\_\_\_\_ Network: ABC\_\_\_\_ CBS\_\_\_\_ NBC\_\_\_\_  
 SHOW\_\_\_\_\_ Time-slot\_\_\_\_\_  
 Type: Non-animated\_\_\_\_ Animated\_\_\_\_  
 Plot-type: Adventure\_\_\_\_ Day-in-the-life\_\_\_\_  
                   Drama\_\_\_\_ Mystery\_\_\_\_  
                   Problem-solving\_\_\_\_ Other\_\_\_\_\_

## CHARACTER SUMMARY PER SHOW:

No. of major characters_____	No. of characters by race:
No. of minor characters_____	Asian_____
	Black_____
No. of child characters_____	Hispanic_____
No. of young adult characters_____	White_____
No. of adult characters_____	Native-Am._____
No. of older characters_____	
Other_____	

No. of human characters_____	No. of males_____
No. of non-human characters_____	No. of females_____

No. of regular characters_____
No. of guest characters_____

## DEPICTIONS OF OLDER CHARACTERS PER SHOW:

Positive\_\_\_\_\_  
 Negative\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

## Saturday Morning Television Shows, Feb. 2, 9, 16, 1991

Network	Time	Show
CBS	7:00 a.m.	Jim Henson's Muppet Babies
CBS	8:00 a.m.	Garfield and Friends
CBS	9:00 a.m.	Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles
CBS	10:00 a.m.	Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventures
CBS	10:30 a.m.	Pee-Wee's Playhouse
ABC	7:00 a.m.	Winnie the Pooh
ABC	7:30 a.m.	Wizard of Oz
ABC	8:00 a.m.	Slimer! and the Real Ghostbusters
ABC	9:00 a.m.	Beetlejuice
ABC	9:30 a.m.	New Kids on the Block
ABC	10:00 a.m.	Bugs Bunny and Tweety Show
NBC	7:00 a.m.	Camp Candy
NBC	7:30 a.m.	Captain N Super Mario Brothers
NBC	8:30 a.m.	Gravedale High
NBC	9:00 a.m.	Kid 'n Play
NBC	9:30 a.m.	The Chipmunks
NBC	10:00 a.m.	Saved by the Bell
NBC	10:30 a.m.	The Guys Next Door