1980

The relative attractiveness of same-sex versus same-race television characters

Karen Kingsley
THE RELATIVE ATTRACTIVENESS OF SAME-SEX VERSUS SAME-RACE TELEVISION CHARACTERS

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State College
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Psychology

by
Karen Kingsley
July 1980
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ABSTRACT

The relative importance of sex and race in determining the attractiveness of televised models to primary school children as determined by time spent watching was evaluated. Previous research showing same-sex and same-race preference was supported, however the pattern of interactions showed that when sex and race similarities were in conflict, blacks chose same-race characters over same-sex characters, while whites chose along same-sex lines. Contrary to prior research, males and females showed no significant differences in the degree of their same-sex preference.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my advisors, Drs. Liss, Cramer, and Cowen for their assistance and encouragement. Thanks are also due to Herb Nichols for his assistance in the computer center, and special thanks go to John Donnelly and Antonia Walker for their efforts in data collection. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the faculty, staff, and students of the Newmark School, the Bonnie Oehl School, and the Muscott School of the San Bernardino City Unified School District.
INTRODUCTION

Early modeling research with children frequently used filmed or videotaped models (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963). The results of this research clearly show that children acquire and perform the behaviors which they view on those media. Further research (Bandura, 1965) has indicated that acquisition, i.e. the observation and cognitive retention of the behaviors, exceeds performance, i.e. the actual imitation of the behaviors, under most circumstances, and that much acquired information remains latent until situational factors or reinforcement contingencies actually elicit performance of the behaviors.

Most of the early television studies involved the modeling and acquisition of aggressive behaviors and aroused great public concern about the long-term effects of large doses of televised violence upon young viewers. However, as researchers began to hypothesize that television could effect more socially desirable behaviors in much the same way (Bryan & Walbek, 1970; Leifer, Gordon, & Graves, 1973), the phenomenon of consciously "prosocial" television was born, and a new line of research was indicated, that is, how best to maximize attention to and imitation of a televised model and enhance learning.

Grusec and Mischel (1966) found that the characteristics of a model determined not only how much of that model's behavior was imitated, but also how much children recalled of the behavior. Rosekrans (1967) also hypothesized that perceived similarity to a social model would influence the extent to which that model's behavior would be imitated by children. She found that both the frequency of imitation and the range of the imitated behavioral repertoire were greater when observers perceived
themselves to be similar to the model, and this effect was more generalized than the effect of response consequences to the model. This supports Stotland's (1962) theory of generalizing similarities; that is, subjects' perceptions of similarities existing between themselves and other persons lead to the perception or creation of other similarities between them. Kagan (1967) explains the same phenomenon quite differently; i.e., observers will pay closer attention to models perceived as similar to themselves because such models violate the commonly held expectancy that we do not share basic personality traits with most strangers we meet. This greater attention results in more learning about a similar model's behavior. The present study was designed to examine and evaluate the relative importance of two dimensions of similarity, sex and race, in determining the attractiveness of televised models.

A same-sex model would be expected to elicit greater attention and imitation for several reasons. The first is the previously discussed perceived similarity effect. In addition, Hartley, Hardesty, and Gorfein (1962) have demonstrated what can best be described as a pure "same-sex preference effect" among young children. They found, among 8 and 11 year olds, a significant preference for same-sex future offspring over opposite-sexed future offspring. The same children generalized their preferences to adults, believing that mothers preferred daughters and fathers preferred sons. This generalization indicates that children believe same-sex preference is natural and common to everyone.

Children are generally reinforced for imitating same-sexed models, that is for "sex-appropriate" behavior. Grusec and Brinker (1972) found that children who were rewarded for imitating one of two adults were able
to recall more of the subsequent behavior of that adult, although film of their eye movements revealed that all subjects watched each adult for the same amount of time. It follows from this that children may differentially code and remember same-sex and opposite-sex models' behavior, with greater retention of the same-sex model's behavior, since reinforcement is usually for same-sex imitation. In the second part of their study, Grusec and Brinker did find that boys remembered more of a male model's behavior than that of a female model, though the similar effect for girls did not reach significance.

In a forced choice procedure, similar to the one used in the present study, Sprafkin and Liebert (1976) found strong same-sex preference, with females showing just as strong a preference as did males. A follow-up questionnaire showed that same-sex characters were named as favorites by 83.9% of the children, as the one most similar to the subject by 90.6% of the children, and as the one most desired to be like by 96.7% of the children. Additionally, same-sex preference was found to be even stronger when the characters were involved in highly sex-typed behaviors. This may reflect the phenomenon demonstrated in Grusec and Brinker, that "sex appropriate" behavior is more closely attended to as a result of reinforcement contingencies, given that reinforcement is generally for same-sex imitation.

Maccoby and Wilson (1957) found that 7th grade viewers identified themselves with like-sexed leading characters in a film, with very little cross-sex identification, and that viewers tend to better remember the words and actions, and the stimuli relevant for the actions, of the characters with whom they identify. The studies cited here
represent only a few examples of the vast literature supporting the theory of same-sex preference in choice of models.

Recent studies of preference based on racial or ethnic similarity have produced quite different results from those of earlier studies. Clark and Clark (1939) found that black children preferred white dolls and rejected black dolls when asked to choose which were nice, which were bad, which they would like to play with, and which were a nice color. However, Hraba and Grant (1970), in a replication of Clark and Clark, found that the majority of their black subjects preferred same-race dolls. The authors saw this as the result of the "Black is beautiful" movement, and found it to be true among all age groups in their study, which included children from 3 years to 8 years of age. This pattern of results is quite representative of the more recent research in contrast to Criswell (1937) who, using sociometric techniques, was unable to find evidence of ethnocentric cleavage earlier than 8 to 10 years of age. Lambert and Taguchi (1956) hypothesized that such cleavage exists in pre-school children, but that it is not demonstrated in the kinds of choices required by standard sociometric techniques. When they devised choices which they assumed to be more meaningful to young children, they did find ethnocentric choices among Oriental children in a Montreal pre-school, but did not discover a statistically significant comparable trend among Occidental youngsters in the same school. They hypothesized that, as a minority group, the Oriental children might perceive more of threat in the mixed racial situation and so might cling more closely together. If this is true, one might also expect to find greater same-race preference among blacks than among whites for similar reasons.
In one of the few studies to measure preference across both gender and ethnicity dimensions, McCandless and Hoyt (1961) examined the playmate preferences among children in the University of Hawaii Preschool. The Hawaiian location was considered important because of the authors' subjective evaluation that it would be more accepting of interracial companionship than the Montreal setting of the Lambert and Taguchi study. Contrary to the hypothesis, however, it was discovered that children differentially selected playmates of their own ethnic group, and this preference existed in the seeming absence of any atmosphere of prejudice. "The authors conclude that prejudice is based on hostility, and, for this reason, tentatively suggest that the ethnic 'discrimination' found among these children is not prejudice as usually thought of, but some sort of 'comfort differential' by ethnic group." (p. 684)

In contrast to Lambert and Taguchi, McCandless and Hoyt did not find a difference in the amount of same-ethnicity preference between groups. Disregarding ethnicity, the boys preferred boys as playmates and girls preferred girls, though the same-sex preference was significantly stronger in boys, which supports the results of Grusec and Brinker.

Studies attempting to show same-race preference for television characters have been somewhat confounded by the paucity of black models, especially black female models, on commercial television. Eastman and Liss (1980) found, in questioning black children, that though they chose black favorite characters more often than did white children, they still chose more white favorites than black favorites. However, they chose a higher percentage of black characters than the overall proportion of black characters on television. Similarly, Greenberg (1972) found that
when asked to choose several favorite characters, blacks included at least one black character in their top three choices.

In a forced-choice between two videotaped programs, one featuring a black character and one featuring a white character, Liss (in press) found a clear same race preference, indicating that, were the models available on commercial television, black children would very likely exhibit a more frequent and stronger same-race character preferences than they have the opportunity to do at present.

Clearly there is substantial experimental evidence supporting both same-gender and same-race hypotheses of character preference choices. Minority race models have been incorporated into several prosocial programs now on the air, including "Sesame Street" and "Fat Albert." However, a number of prosocial programs have maintained primarily male casts, possibly assuming that females would watch and learn from males, but males would not watch and learn from females.

Using a procedure adapted from Sprafkin and Liebert (1976) and Liss (in press) which defines character/program choice as a measure of preference and perceived similarity, expected to lead to greater attention and therefore greater learning, retention, and imitation, this study was an attempt to discover which dimension is more salient to children in their choice of a televised model, gender or race.
METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 80 primary school children attending public schools in the San Bernardino City Unified School District. Most of the subjects were in either first or second grade; eight third graders were selected from second/third grade combination classes. The mean age of subjects was 7.08 years. All of the subjects were volunteers, and all were required to have written parental consent in order to participate in the study (see appendix 1).

The subjects were equally divided by sex (40 boys, 40 girls) and by race (40 black, 40 white) in a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design with character/program condition as the third variable.

While individual socio-economic data was not collected all three schools participating in the study were located in similar lower-middle to middle SES neighborhoods, and subjects were randomly assigned to program conditions.

Apparatus and Materials

An empty class room, or partitioned section of a classroom, with a minimum of external distraction was used as the experimental room. Two videotape recorders (Sony model AV-3600 and model AV-3650) and a monitor (Sony model CVM 194) were used for viewing programs. Subjects used a two channel switch to select programs as they would on a normal television set. The videotape recorders and measuring apparatus were concealed from the subjects in order to simulate as closely as possible the normal viewing experience. Two electric digital timers (Lafayette model 54030) recorded the cumulative time spent watching each channel.
The stimulus materials were segments of four popular situation comedy programs, "Good Times," "What's Happening," "The Partridge Family," and "One Day at a Time." Of the four programs only "One Day at a Time" is currently on the air in first-run shows. All of the other programs appear on the air as syndicated reruns. The "One Day at a Time" episode used in this experiment was also a rerun of about the same vintage as the other programs. All programs had been edited for title music, commercials, and other confounding material such as extraneous cross-gender character activity. "Good Times" was chosen to represent the black female character choice, "What's Happening" to represent the black male character choice, "One Day at a Time" to represent the white female character choice, and "The Partridge Family" to represent the white male character choice.

Initially "Happy Days" was chosen to represent the white male character choice, however the overwhelming popularity of the character of "The Fonz," across children of both genders and races, resulted in what can best be described as a "ratings effect." All of the children, given the opportunity, watched "Happy Days." This was true in spite of the fact that an interracial panel of adult raters had rated all four programs to be roughly similar on the dimensions of action, humor, plot comprehensibility, and overall entertainment value (see appendix 2). The salience of the character of "The Fonz," resulting in the subjects' nearly unanimous preference for the program "Happy Days," was judged to be a confound interfering with a true test of model preference under normal conditions. All data from subjects who had been exposed to a choice including "Happy Days" was discarded and replaced with data from
new subjects. The program was replaced by an episode of "The Partridge Family," which the experimenter judged to be similar to the other programs on the previously rated dimensions.

All programs focused on models in their early teens, and included some interaction with cross-gender friends and family members. Through editing, this was held relatively constant across programs. In addition, all programs except "One Day at a Time" included a brief interracial interaction. Although each of these programs runs for 30 minutes in its unedited state, the experimental videotapes contained only the first 10 minutes of each edited program.

**Procedure**

Subjects were brought individually to the experimental room, where they were asked to sit and watch television while the experimenter did some other work. Before they began to watch television, they were instructed in the use of the two-channel switch, as follows:

This TV isn't like the one you have at home. The channel-changer (indicating the dial) has been changed, and now you have to change channels with this (indicating the switch). You can hear it click when you change it (demonstrating the switch). It has only two channels, Channel 1 and Channel 2. I'll turn it on here (turning on the power knob on the front of the monitor) but you won't see a picture until I turn it on in the back. Don't change the channel until you see the picture (handing the child the switch), but once you see the picture, you can change the channel as often as you want to, anytime you want to.

The initial position of the switch was alternated with each subject, so that, within each cell, there were an equal number of subjects starting on each position. Subjects were allowed to watch the television for 10 minutes before being interrupted. At that point each child was given a sex-race picture choice task (see appendix 3) which served as a
distractor task. Then each participant was rewarded with a choice of token rewards. It was hoped that, in addition to ending the interview on a very positive note, this last choice and reward might also be the most salient aspect of the interview in the child's mind upon leaving, and so might help to minimize discussion of the stimulus materials. Feedback from incoming subjects indicated the reward was very effective in this regard.

The experimenters were one white female, one black female, and one white male. Although previous research (Moreland, 1966; Hraba and Grant, 1970) has reported that race of interviewer does not significantly affect respondents choices, subjects were randomly assigned to experimenters.
RESULTS

The overall design of the study was a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design with program condition, race of viewer, and sex of viewer as the three independent variables. Program Condition 1 represented a choice between a program featuring a white male character, "The Partridge Family," and one featuring a black female character, "Good Times." Half of the subjects in the sample were exposed to this condition. The other half of the subjects were exposed to Condition 2, which represented a choice between a program featuring a black male, "What's Happening," and one featuring a white female, "One Day at a Time. Therefore, in each condition, two of the four groups (black males, black females, white males, and white females) were forced to choose between a cross-sex model of the same race and a cross-race model of the same sex, while the other two groups had the opportunity to choose models that were identical to themselves on both of these dimensions.

An analysis of variance was performed on the dependent variable, time spent watching males, as it was effected by sex of viewer, race of viewer, and program condition, and the results of this ANOVA appear in Table 1. Alpha was set at .05 for all calculations, with more precise probability values stated for significant effects when available. For the post hoc tests of significant interactions, Dunn's procedure was used to protect Type 1 error levels at the level of the interaction. In these cases, alpha was set at .05/(the number of comparisons=4).

A significant effect was discovered for program condition, $F(1,72) = 12.29, p < .001$, indicating that males were watched more in
Condition 2 (black male/white female choice) than in Condition 1 (white male/ black female choice). This effect is explained by the interaction of program condition and race, $F(1,72) = 19.16, p < .001$, which is graphically represented in Figure 1. Post hoc tests on this interaction showed that race was significant at Condition 1, the white male/black female choice, $t(72) = 2.72, p < .01$. In this condition, blacks, males and females, watched males less than did whites, preferring to watch black females instead. Race was also found to be significant at Condition 2, the black male/white female choice, $t(72) = 3.47, p < .01$, indicating that, in this case, blacks, males and females, watched the black males more than whites did. The significance of program condition, the condition/race interaction, and the post hoc tests all demonstrate that blacks chose programs primarily on the basis of their racial similarity to the televised model, even when this required choosing a cross gender model to watch.

In Figure 1, this result is illustrated by the steeply inclined line representing black subjects, which shows a mean difference of 325.6 seconds between the two conditions. For blacks, then, within this design, the determining factor in how much time was spent watching males was program condition; in other words, whether the major character was black.

The second line in Figure 1 representing whites, on the other hand, is much flatter, with a mean difference of only 36.2 seconds between conditions. This flattening of the line resulted from same-sex preference among whites.

The significance of the sex of viewer effect, $F(1,72) = 5.423$,
p < .023, indicated that males spent more time watching males than did females, and also the corollary, that females spent more time watching females than did males. This same-sex preference was significant for the sample overall in spite of the fact that the previously discussed race/program condition interaction showed that blacks were making significant numbers of cross-sex choices, presumably in order to choose same-race models. The fact that sex of viewer significantly affected the amount of time spent watching males for the sample overall, although it was not a salient factor in program choice among blacks, indicates that same-sex preference was quite pronounced among whites. This difference between the racial groups was reflected in the race/sex interaction, F (1,72) = 6.62, p < .012. This interaction is graphically illustrated in Figure 2. This figure shows a mean difference of 202.55 seconds in time spent watching males between white males and white females, with males watching longer. On the other hand, the black line is nearly flat, with only 10.1 seconds mean difference between the male and female groups. This is further indication that same-sex preference was not a salient factor in program choice among blacks when it was in conflict with racial similarity to the model.

A post hoc test of the sex/race interaction showed race significant at Sex 1 (females), t (72) = -2.358, p < .01. This was accounted for primarily by the black female sample which was exposed to Condition 2, the black male/white female choice, which had a cell mean of 507.5 (see Table 2). These subjects were making cross-gender choices by watching same-race males.

Further comparison of the group means for all blacks for time spent
watching blacks and all whites for time spent watching whites showed same-race preference to be significantly stronger in blacks than in whites, $t (72) = 2.53, p < .05$. Also, in contrast to some previous research, a comparison of the means of the male sample's time spent watching males and the female sample's time spent watching females showed same-sex preference not to be significantly stronger in males than in females, $t (72) = 1.35, p > .05$. 
Table 1
Analysis of Variance

<table>
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<th>Source</th>
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<th>Significance</th>
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<td>.595</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<td>185185.012</td>
<td>5.423</td>
<td>.023</td>
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<td>.001</td>
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<td>Race/Sex</td>
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<td>.012</td>
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<td>Error</td>
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Figure 1

PROGRAM CONDITION/RACE INTERACTION

TIME SPENT WATCHING MALES IN SECONDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONDITION 1</th>
<th>CONDITION 2</th>
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<td>BM/WF</td>
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<tr>
<td>BLACK</td>
<td>WHITE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X = 501.8</td>
<td>X = 501.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X = 335</td>
<td>X = 298.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>X = 176.2</td>
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</table>
Figure 2

RACE/SEX INTERACTION

TIME SPENT WATCHING MALES IN SECONDS

BLACK
X = 344.05

WHITE
X = 418.2

BLACK
X = 333.95

WHITE
X = 215.65

SEX 1 (FEMALES)

SEX 2 (MALES)
Table 2
Cell Means in Seconds
Time watching males/Time watching females

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition 1</th>
<th>Male Viewers</th>
<th>Female Viewers</th>
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<tr>
<td>WM-BF</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>171.8</td>
<td>385.1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>428.2</td>
<td>214.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Condition 2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>496.1</td>
<td>451.3</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>103.9</td>
<td>148.7</td>
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</table>
DISCUSSION

Previous research showing same-sex and same-race preference was supported in this study. However, when character race and sex similarities conflicted, blacks chose same-race characters over same-sex characters, while whites chose along same-sex lines. The strong significance of same-race preference among blacks as opposed to whites lends support to the hypothesis of Lambert and Taguchi (1956) that minority group members might show more ethnocentric choice because of a need for affiliation in a majority culture perceived as threatening. In the opinion of McCandless and Hoyt (1961), this does not reflect prejudice, as it is commonly understood, but rather a "'comfort'" differential by ethnic group.

The strength of the race effect among blacks, in spite of the fact that half of the black viewers within each condition were exposed to a cross-sex black model, indicates that racial similarity of characters is by far a more salient factor in program choice among black viewers in the 6 to 9 year old group than gender similarity. This may be, in part, because "race of show" is such an easily noticeable characteristic. Most television programs have some characters of each gender, and although there may be fewer female characters, and their behavior may be more circumscribed (Tedesco, 1974), their presence still creates a mixed-gender environment. Even if a female regular character is entirely missing from a given episode, she is likely to reappear in the following episode. On the other hand, "black shows" have been almost entirely and continuously black from episode to episode and are
relatively easily labeled because it is still unusual to see blacks in
major roles on television. In "Window Dressing on the Set; Women and
Minorities on Television" (1977) the U.S. Commission Civil Rights found
that non-anglo characters accounted for only 10.9% of the characters on
prime time television. Non-anglo females accounted for only 2.3% of the
characters, and these were often less important characters. Therefore,
it is immediately apparent, particularly in a forced choice situation
with only two options, that there is a "black show" and a "white show."
In fact, one of the experimenters in this study, naive to the rationale
behind the choice of program materials, noticed only the black/white
dichotomy and was unaware of the male/female dichotomy until it was
pointed out. Possibly the all-one-gender message contained in the
program materials was more subtle than the all-one-race message.

An interesting trend has become apparent in race preference meas-
ures among blacks. Beginning with the early work of Clark and Clark
(1939), in which blacks were shown to prefer white models, we have seen
an emergence and strengthening of same-race preference among blacks
which parallels their social and political emergence in our culture.
Hraba and Grant (1970) found well established same-race preference
among blacks with little difference between whites and blacks in the
degree of same-race preference. In this study black same-race prefer-
ence was found to be significantly stronger than that of whites. This
very strong effect may be the result of a growing unsatisfied hunger
among now proud blacks for acceptable models, to which the media may
not be sufficiently responsive.

A similar trend may be emerging among females, again paralleling
children cannot learn and benefit from such programs if they do not watch them.

This research suggests several policies for those in the media who wish to maximize attention to their programs. First, in order to reach the young black audience, it is absolutely essential to feature black characters, and these should be regular characters, whose frequent appearance can be anticipated. To reach the broadest possible audience, the show should have a sufficient racial mix to avoid an immediate ethnic label which might discourage another ethnic group. And, finally, as no significant differences were found between genders on degree of same-sex preference, there should be equal numbers of male and female characters with roughly equivalent importance within the action of the program. Research demonstrating children's desire for highly similar models (Bandura, 1971) and their reliance on the affiliative characteristics of peers (McCandless and Hoyt, 1961), would also be supportive of such program development. Given the amount of time spent watching television (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, and Roberts, 1978) and the evidence of the modeling literature, program choices both reflect the child's social priorities and development and serve to formulate them. It is of vital importance that so pervasive an influence base its policy decisions on the best information we have about the nature and needs of its young audience.
their emergence within the culture. Grusec and Brinker (1972) found gender differences in same-sex preference, with males reaching significant levels while females did not. However Sprafkin and Liebert (1976) found no significant differences between genders, although females exhibited slightly greater same-sex preference. The results of this study showed no significant differences between males and females in the degree of their same-sex preference. Again, this trend is not reflected in the media. In a content analysis of prime time programming, McNeil (1975) showed that 69% of all characters were male (60% in comedy and 74% in drama) and 78% of all major characters were male (63% in comedy and 95% in drama). Children's programming is similar. Sternglanz and Serbin (1974) showed male characters outnumbering female characters 2 to 1 on children's programming. Sprafkin and Liebert (1980) have suggested the broadcasters' economic rationale behind the preponderance of male characters has been that the male characters would draw an audience while the female characters would not. Their results and those of this study show that this is clearly not the case. These findings may have important ramifications for such prosocial programs as "Fat Albert," which limits itself almost entirely to black male characters. While the show and its message probably reach most of the young black audience, especially males, and may be moderately attractive to white males, it is likely to be less than effective with white females. The addition of some female characters would improve this situation and probably increase the show's effectiveness with black females as well. Regarding educational and prosocial programming, this type of adjustment has positive social value, as
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March, 1980

Dear Parents:

We are psychologists at California State College, San Bernardino interested in children's selective preferences in television characters. At present we are examining children's preferences in the basis of character gender and ethnicity. The study takes about 15 minutes per child and is non-evaluative in nature. Your child's school has given their approval to this study. We hope you will be interested in having your child participate in this project. We would appreciate it if you would fill in the information requested below and return the slip to your child's teacher.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Karen Kingsley
Project Coordinator

Marsha B. Liss, Ph. D.
Assistant Professor
Project Director

I do _____ do not _____ give permission for my child ______________________, age _____, sex _____, ethnic background (optional) ________________, to participate in the study of television character preferences.

Parent's signature ____________________________________
Please rate the program you have just viewed, using 1 as the lowest rating and 5 as the highest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Title</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
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<td>Level of Activity</td>
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<td>Comprehensibility of plot</td>
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<td>Overall entertainment value</td>
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QUESTIONS FOR SEX?RACE PICTURE PREFERENCES

Ask the following questions for each of the picture combinations listed below. Altogether each question should be asked six times. Put the picture's number on the blank space.

a) Which child would you like to play with?

b) Which child is most like you?

1) All three opposite sex pictures: a) ____________

b) ____________

2) All three same-sex pictures: a) ____________

b) ____________

3) The two same-sex opposite-race/ethnic: a) ____________

b) ____________

4) The two opposite-sex opposite race/ethnic: a) ____________

b) ____________

5) All four opposite-race-ethnic: a) ____________

b) ____________

6) All six pictures: a) ____________

b) ____________

Comments:

Child's sex ____________ race/ethnic ________________

subject # ________________ program condition ________________

experimenter ________________

NOTE: Start the questions with: I'm going to show you some pictures of children...