The United States' Population as Portrayed on Television

Hannah Fleahman  
*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

Amber France  
*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

Tyrece Gibbs  
*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

Mirielle Rouillard  
*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholars.unh.edu/perspectives](https://scholars.unh.edu/perspectives)

**Recommended Citation**  
Fleahman, Hannah; France, Amber; Gibbs, Tyrece; and Rouillard, Mirielle (2009) "The United States' Population as Portrayed on Television," *Perspectives*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.  
Available at: [https://scholars.unh.edu/perspectives/vol1/iss1/7](https://scholars.unh.edu/perspectives/vol1/iss1/7)

*This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Journals and Publications at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives by an authorized editor of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.*
The United States’ Population as Portrayed on Television

By:

Hannah Fleahman, Amber France,
Tyrece Gibbs, & Mirielle Rouillard
INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, there has been much controversy over the effects of television and how influential it can be towards its viewers. Research shows that children, on average, watch television seven days per week (Maher et. al 2008). For many children, television is a learning mechanism for numerous aspects of their lives. In accordance, young adults, and others alike, choose programs that feature characters similar to themselves. Therefore, identity formation is pertinent to the selection of television programs, and the mental process of selecting a television program enhances a person’s sense of belonging (Brown and Pardun 2004). As a result, viewers learn from their exposure to television, and these character roles then determine a viewer’s response (Maher et al. 2008).

The purpose of this research project is to examine television’s portrayal of the United States’ population, based on the characteristics of race, gender, and family dynamics (i.e. married, divorced, and single parent families). As a result, our research question states “Do television shows, aimed towards teens/young adults, accurately portray the population characteristics of its intended audience?” Past research has shown that television shows have a tendency to be inaccurate and under-represent minority groups. Therefore, we will be cross-examining data obtained from a content analysis of television shows with the Census 2000 data. We will then examine student perceptions of television’s accuracy to further clarify this issue.

Overall, television plays an important role in societal life, for it is highly influential to the social development of the country’s youth. In general, this research could prove useful to television networks, for creating and developing more accurate and popular programs. We also believe that these findings might prove interesting to the general public, and perhaps shed light on what the “true” American family looks like.
At first, we specifically wanted to research television’s portrayal of family dynamics (i.e. the frequency that marriage and divorce was portrayed on television). However, as we began to examine this topic we found that the inaccuracy of television could be expanded to many other categories; such as, the numerical misrepresentation of race and gender on television. After examining past research on similar topics, we decided to expand the study to cover race, gender, and family dynamics. This was done in hopes that expanding our topic would differentiate our research from that done in the past.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, past sociological research has reflected the impacts of television, as well as what types of people are most represented on popular shows. This research includes topics such as how race, gender and sexuality are shown, and the influences they have on their audiences. However, there does not seem to be any research devoted to the subject of family dynamics (i.e. married, divorced, separated families, etc.) and how they are portrayed on popular television shows. This is an important research topic, because it will determine the accuracy of what people subject themselves to everyday. The results of this study will examine if television portrays reality or if the projected characteristics are false perceptions. Drawing from past research of gender and race, this topic will add to the literature by creating a novel topic that few, if any studies, have completely explored by looking at race and gender, as well as, family dynamics.

Television and Gender Roles

It is no secret that throughout the history of popular television, women and men have not been proportionality portrayed (Gow 1996). The Census 2000 depicts a near even match in the men to women ratio in our population. However, prime time television shows typically project a three to one ratio of men to women (Gow 1996). Research conducted in the seventies and today
does not show a great disparity in how accurate of a portrayal television actually presents. In the 1970s, it was found that 30% of all major characters were women, and a study conducted in 1999 found that number had dropped to 17.7% (Elasmar, Hasegawa, & Brain 1999). This seems to be a surprising finding due to the attention media is bringing to the misrepresentations. However, the same study did find an increase in female characters within some aspect of primetime television overall, from 30% to 39% (Elasmar et al. 1999). Reasoning for these two very different findings could be that attention was brought to the misrepresentation, which caused the networks to add women within the backgrounds of shows, or as a supporting role, and took them out of the main roles (Elasmar et al. 1999).

The variety of roles in which women possess on television has varied over the years, and they have been quite different from that of men. Very few women are shown to have professional ‘white collar’ jobs, (only 9.9%) but if they are put into these roles, they tend to be single women, or women who have been in a marriage that failed due to their job (Elasmar et al. 1999). Women are also frequently portrayed much younger than in the past, with the typical ‘blonde hair, blue eyes’ ideal of beauty, and tend to have more parental responsibilities (Glascock 2001). In the past, women were cast as typical housewives and, while that still exists at times today, they play roles in which they act seductively (Gow 1996).

Males, on the other hand, will typically play leadership roles, act aggressively, and have the economic success within the family (Lauzen & Dozier 2005). According to research conducted, it seems to be more ‘natural’ for men to hold these qualities than it is for women (Lauzen & Dozier 2005). However, one area of television in which the gender gap has significantly shrunk is soap operas. The cast of men and women seem to be more representative of the true
population, however, the roles females accept are typical of the demographics described above (Gow 1996).

Along with the above findings, popular television shows geared towards teens are especially criticized for the effect and influence they have on their viewers. Music Television, or MTV, was the first television station directed solely towards music videos. During the 1980’s, research conducted on the network found that women were under-represented six to one (Gow 1996). Following that, Gow (1996) put together a study analyzing the top 100 popular music videos of the 1990s, for which he wanted to determine if new regulations led to any changes in who and what was represented in the videos. Research found that, a decade later, the ratio of women to men shown in these music videos did not change much (five to one) (Gow 1996).

According to the research, it is evident that women are under-represented within popular television shows. This may be correlated to the fact that the writers, as well as producers, of these shows are predominantly male (Glascock 2001). Of the females who are involved in the production process, only about a quarter of them have any form of creative control (Glascock 2001). However, there are some female-based television shows such as *Felicity*, or networks like *Lifetime*, which primarily attract female viewers. Those types of shows tend to be few and far between, and have shorter runs than major network shows. This is because almost all the funding of television networks comes from advertisers who pay for commercial time. Advertisers tend to stay away from networks that produce for female based audiences, because they want a more evenly split audience between men and women (Glascock 2001).

All of these aspects of gender inequality within the television networks can affect the lives of the intended audiences. It gives the viewers the impression that this is reality and it may, in turn, manipulate the ideas and beliefs of young adults. Women being under-represented sends the
message that they are considered to be less valuable than men (Elasmar et al. 1999). Some of the demographics portrayed through these female characters also instill the notion that a woman is typically a housewife who takes care of her children and does not have a good career. On the other hand, if she is unmarried, she is portrayed as sexy and seductive (Gow 1996). Our nation has come so far with women’s rights and it is very typical for women to be successful in their work. However, that does not seem to be accurately shown in television. Males do not face the under-representation problem on television, however the typical dynamics attributed to them do not tend to match reality either (Gow 1996). All of these inaccurate portrayals of men and women add to the false perceptions perceived by viewers. Along with gender roles, race is another characteristic that is not accurately portrayed on television.

*Television and Race*

Unsurprisingly, race is a basic motivator for an individual’s choice in television programs (Brown and Pardun 2004). Bell-Jordan (2008) found the meaning of race corresponds to an individual’s sense of social reality. United States is a country deeply rooted in racism; and that television expresses many of these unresolved conflicts that have been constructed through peoples’ own experiences (Bell-Jordan 2008). Brown and Pardun (2004) found that television networks capitalize off these racial conflicts, and design programs that reinforce these issues and differences.

Therefore, as presented on television, master statuses, like race, create stigmatizing effects for ethnic groups (Hurtado and Silva 2008). These ethnic differences are then represented on television, creating an even greater sense of diversity amongst society. However, what is noted as popular with one group is not necessarily popular with another. As Brown and Pardun (2004) found, only 4 out of 140 television shows were watched by more than one-third of all teens.
Therefore, it becomes clear that these racial/ethnic differences truly are cemented within the contours of the media.

Caucasians. In general, Caucasians tend to be grossly over-represented within the media and advertising. In a study conducted by Maher et al. (2008), Caucasians were over-represented by 81.7% in television ads aired on Philadelphian networks, as compared to their actual representation of 73.4% of the population in that area. Comparatively, Caucasians appear in 47.5% of the overall television commercials aired, and 50% of the time these ads are comprised of only white characters (Maher et al. 2008).

However, this large over-representation may yield harmful results. According to Maher et al. (2008), Caucasians tend to be cast in a positive light, however they also theorize that this representation may create a false sense of superiority within the group. In addition, they found that Caucasians tend to be shown interacting with other races less often than any other group. Therefore, in accordance with the concept of self-identity, Caucasians tend to take interest in programs that have an all white cast (Brown and Pardun 2004). In agreement, African-Americans have similar tendencies.

African-Americans. According to Brown and Pardun (2004), 60 to 75% of African-American teens reported watching shows consisting of an all Black cast, like Moesha. On the contrary, they found that Black teens still reported watching shows with all white casts, like Sabrina the Teenage Witch. Overall, race was a more prominent motivator for television choices than gender for African-Americans. However, Black characters only comprise 16% of major and minor roles on television, even though there has been in increase in the number of Black characters since the 1980s (Brown and Pardun 2004).
Subsequently, African-Americans tend to be under-represented in major roles, and over-represented in minor roles (Maher et al. 2008). Overall, Brown and Pardun (2004) reported that Black males tend to be one of the most under-represented populations. They found that UPN was the only station that still airs shows with all Black casts. However, these shows were all comedies, and only aired on the smallest viewing days (i.e. Monday and Friday nights) (Brown and Pardun 2004). Overall, African-Americans were represented in only 1% of all television advertisements (Maher et al. 2008). Also, the Philadelphia study found that Blacks were aired in only 14.1% of the ads in the city as compared to their actual representation of 17.7% of the population (Maher et al. 2008).

Nevertheless, the media still stigmatizes African-Americans as invisible. Generally, Blacks are “ghettoized” by television (Brown and Pardun 2004). Many times, they are stereotyped as criminals, unintelligent and lazy (Maher et al. 2008). Some programs, for instance The Real World, perpetuate the stereotype of the angry black man, and “hood” vs. “integrated” lifestyles (Bell-Jordan 2008).

However, some shows attempt to debunk the myths about African-Americans. Children’s shows, for example Little Bill, address the concepts of multiculturalism and intersectionalism (Hurtado and Silva 2008). According to Hurtado and Silva (2008), Little Bill attempts to present African-Americans as non-violent and intelligent. The show also tries to present African-American families as loving families, not the dysfunctional ones that other shows present. However, black families still remain under-represented on television.

Hispanics. Similarly, like other minorities, Hispanics are severely under-represented in the media, and are generally stereotyped as being lazy, criminals, and illegal immigrants (Maher et al. 2008). Therefore, it is no surprise to find that Hispanics appear in less than 0.5% of ads on
television, and are usually aired along side other minorities (Maher et al. 2008). In the Philadelphian study, Hispanics were found to appear in 1.5% of the ads aired on television in comparison to their actual representation of 5.7% of the city’s population. Therefore, Maher et al. (2008) suggests studying the ad representation to population ratio of predominately Hispanic communities, like San Antonio and Miami, for a comparison. However, many young Hispanics do not report noticing the under-representation of their ethnicity on television or in society. As well as gender and race, sexual behavior is another influential issue portrayed inaccurately by television.

**Television and its Perception of Marriage**

Television allows viewers to get an inside look at family life. Television shows portray the dynamics and issues of marriage; however, these portrayals are generally incorrect. This is expected, to some extent, when dealing with mass media; however, television makes it seem as though marriage is not an important aspect of family life and society. Among other things, views on family life have been altered through television and its portrayal of marriage.

Stepfamilies, in particular, have negative connotations depicted on television. Since remarriage is already seen as an “incomplete institution,” it is looked at differently within society (Cherlin 1978). The stepparent-child relationship is unstable or nonexistent within different television shows, which could cause children to garner these same attitudes toward their stepparent. Stepfamilies portrayed on television have made way for the “wicked stepmother” stereotype (Leon and Angst 2005). These types of families are likely to be portrayed negatively, with more conflict and dysfunction (Leon and Angst 2005). In these situations the spousal relationship is not as strong, and there is always conflict or complication regarding the biological parent not involved with the family. Furthermore, teens’ attitudes toward their stepparent may
vary. They range from acceptance to rejection of a stepparent into their lives. These emotions are often centered on the idea that a stepparent is taking the place of a child’s biological parent. Nonetheless, television affects their attitudes because it is all they see and know about the situation.

Overall, marriage is an American institution that shows up throughout all types of media. Television, in particular, tends to show mixed representations of marriage (Leon and Angst 2005). Different shows depict women taking on different roles in a marriage. Oftentimes, these roles demonstrate and glorify the typical housewife model for a female. Since social structure has shifted, more and more shows are starting to show women having more equality, as well as, more empowerment. Marriages are no longer male dominated on television, and females do not always take on submissive roles. In accordance, mothers are not solely confined to being a housewife, for they are now portrayed as working mothers (Leon and Angst 2005).

Television does, however, help to boost perceptions of marriage by allowing families to be seen as functioning, with both parents in the workforce, and couples working through their marital issues (Leon and Angst 2005). This portrayal reassures youth that marriage can work and divorce is not always the only option. Current shows depict marriage as a mutual relationship. Furthermore, it causes more of today’s youth to grow up with the idea that their wife will work, while still being the mother figure needed in the home (Leon and Angst 2005). More so, conflict within the family is portrayed as actually being resolved in a proper manner. It is important for the youth to see marriage portrayed as functional, as opposed to the dysfunctional marriages that are so often aired on television. More recently, marriages portrayed on television show satisfaction in relationships and, for the most part, content spouses.
Studies done on television and family life suggest that the parent-child relationships are strengthened by the way families are depicted on television (Douglas and Olson 1995). In most instances, parents have a relationship with their children on television shows and are seen as being a loving parent. Even when there is conflict throughout the show, it often gets resolved through parent-child interaction by the end of the show (Douglas and Olson 1995). An example of this is *The Cosby Show*. There is a clear distinction between shows like *The Cosby Show* and *The Simpsons*. Most shows have a “Cosby model” and illustrate a balance between parent and child (Douglas and Olson 1995). The relationship retains its authoritative order, but allows the child to grow and learn on his or her own. This is undoubtedly positive because young adults watch these shows and get a sense of how the relationship with their parents should be. Therefore, these ideas are unconsciously encrypted into their minds by the shows they watch and the dynamics portrayed.

**Conclusion**

In brief, television plays an important role in American households. It acts as a learning mechanism for children and adolescents, reinforces the status quo, generates stereotypes and affects perceptions of reality. Societal dynamics are generally present within the contours of television programs, however their accuracy is debatable. All things considered, people are motivated to choose a television program based on the show’s relativity to their lives. Thus, the accuracy of the before mentioned characteristics (e.g. gender, race, family, etc.), as presented through the media, are imperative for formulating realistic scenarios that society can identify with. Therefore, for the purpose of our study, we hypothesize that (1) television falsely represents actual U.S. population characteristics, and (2) students are unaware of these
inaccuracies. Lastly, our study was designed with specific methodology in order to thoroughly examine these hypotheses.

METHODS

Overall, we collected and examined three different sources of data. These three populations consisted of University of New Hampshire students, popular television shows, and Census 2000 data. We then cross-referenced the three populations in order to get the most accurate data possible.

Survey

In order to gain access to the participants, an email was sent out to a professor, asking permission to conduct research in his/her class. It was explained that a research study is being conducted on the accuracy of television shows in relation to its conveyed perceptions of race, gender, and family dynamics. It was also explained that the survey being administered was about television and how the participants perceive the numerical representation of the certain characteristics. Then, through convenience sampling, we chose the first available Introduction to Sociology class to survey. Upon acceptance, a date and time was arranged that the survey could be administered.

Secondly, we administered surveys to a class of 139 registered students. Every participant was given a survey with 10 questions, which took about 10-15 minutes to complete. We received 84 completed surveys, however, two were discarded, therefore leaving us with 82 useable surveys.

Content Analysis

Next, the content analysis was done by coding seven shows based on the demographics of the main characters featured in popular television shows. We chose shows based on the criteria of
being (1) aired on one of the major television networks and (2) having a plot that was based on the lives of young adults (ages 13-21). The shows must also have been accessible by digital tuning, previously known as analog. The reasoning for this is that all of the television shows are available to all people with analog televisions. Also, the shows must have been listed on a network’s webpage under “Shows”, and who and how old the characters were was determined under the “Cast” section on the network’s website. The networks that the shows were derived from included ABC, NBC, CBS, CW, MNT, FOX, and PBS. The finalized list of television shows, chosen by convenience sampling, included: That 70’s Show, Everybody Hates Chris, 90210, One Tree Hill, Gossip Girl, Smallville, and Friday Night Lights.

Each of the researchers was then assigned one or two of the television shows to code. Each researcher was instructed to watch the first two episodes of the show’s first season. We were then instructed to code the characteristics of only the teenage/young adult characters. These characteristics included race, gender, and family dynamic (i.e. the marital status of the character’s parents).

Census 2000

To provide information on the whole population, we utilized demographic data from the Census 2000 in order to get an actual representation of the U.S. population’s characteristics. We chose to use this data for basis of comparison with the content analysis in order to see if television is truly representative of the U.S. population. Therefore, we specifically looked at gender, race, and family dynamics. The elements of family dynamics we studied included married, divorced, and single parents. Overall, we had very specific and valid reasons for selecting these variables.
DATA

Content analysis

The variables we chose to look at came from our literature review. We determined the variables of race, gender, and family dynamics were important in relation to our research question due to past research, and the lack information pertaining to family dynamics. Also, the specific variables were chosen because they were represented in the Census 2000 data set, and thus easily comparable to the data we obtained from our analysis. Secondly, the variables were measured based on the frequency of occurrence for each teenage character in the television shows. When analyzing this population, the statistical program STATA was used. Our hypothesis was then analyzed through cross referencing Census 2000 data with the information presented in the analysis, to see whether or not the television accurately represented the correct percentile breakdown of each population.

Overall, this section created unique problems when discussing the design of the study. Since the study was designed for the researchers to only watch the first two episodes of the first season of each show, not all the characters in every show had a background story that was developed. Due to this inconvenience, we found that we did not have sufficient information on a number of characters, possibly leading to inconclusive results when comparing it to the Census 2000. Also, when recording for race and age as shown on television, we found that the actors’ real age and race may have skewed the coders’ interpretations of data. For instance, a Hispanic actor plays Fez on That 70’s Show; however, Fez’s race is unable to classify accurately.

Survey

When administering the survey, participants were asked questions regarding television’s accuracy. Participants were asked to give their opinion/perception of television’s representation
of race, gender and family dynamics. We chose to analyze these variables, because they were the demographics we chose to analyze in the content analysis section of our project. We measured the variables based on the frequency of responses, and once data was coded and entered, we found the percentages of the majority’s responses. SPSS was used when coding and performing analysis on the survey responses. Next, we then compared these percentages to our hypothesis concerning students’ perceptions of television, to evaluate whether or not it was supported.

There were a few problems in the initial design. First, after administration, we had to remove two surveys from the sample: one because the participant had written their name on the survey, and the other because the participant indicated they were a high school student who was taking college classes, so their age could not be determined.

Secondly, some questions were given too many responses for which participants could choose. We allowed participants to choose “other” for “gender”. This created problems during analysis, because one participant wrote that they identified itself as “gender queer;” for analysis purposes, that response had to be omitted. Also, when asking which genre of television the participants preferred and why they watched television, we gave them an option of other, which also proved to make the analysis difficult. Furthermore, when asking about their opinion of television’s accuracy in representing gender and family dynamics, we allowed the participants to answer “I do not know”, which, after analysis, could neither support nor deny our initial hypotheses.

*Census 2000*

For comparison purposes, we chose variables in the *Census 2000* data set that would be easily found in the television shows we would be watching. We chose the categories of race, gender and family dynamics as it was reported in the *Census 2000*. Once the percentile breakdown of
the population was obtained and categorized; they were compared to the percentile breakdown of what the television shows represented. This was done in order to see whether or not our initial hypothesis of television’s accuracy could be supported or denied.

In general, there was only one complication when it came to the analysis of the data set. When obtaining information for race, the Census 2000 defined Caucasians as “White” and “Hispanic,” though giving individual percentages for each population. When trying to obtain an individual percentage for Caucasians in the U.S. population, it required mathematical calculations to separate the categories. Also, we had trouble with identifying certain categories, such as the race division between White and Hispanic. If categories were more easily defined and realistically broken down, the comparison might have been easier to complete. However, despite a few complications we were able to yield individualized results.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis

Survey. The survey population consisted of 82 participants. Our sample contained participants of which 33% were male and 66% female (see Table 1.1). Participants were asked about their class standing, and 50% indicated they were freshman, 16% sophomores, 17% juniors, 16% seniors and 1% other, of which the participant specified they were continuing education at the University (see Table 1.1). When participants were questioned on how often, on average, a week they watch television, 43% chose between the range of 0-5 hours, 28% chose between 6-10 hours, 13% between 11-15, 9% between 16-20, 5% between 21-25 and 2% watching more than 31+ hours in a week (see Table 1.1). Inquiring as to the participants’ favorite genre, 34% of the sample responded comedy, 21% responded drama, 17% chose sports and 22% chose reality, whereas 1% responded game shows and cartoons, 3% chose other, and 1% chose the option of
none of the categories listed (see Table 1.1). When asked why the participant watches television, it was found that 85% of the population chose the option of entertainment, as compared to 2% who chose education/informational purposes, and 13% responded they only watch television because someone (family/friend/roommate) has it on (see Table 1.1).

Content Analysis. The content analysis population comprised of 47 characters, 57% of which were male and 43% female (see Table 1.2). When analyzing the race of the characters, 79% of the sample was Caucasian, 19% was African-American and 1% was Hispanic (See Table 1.2). According to family dynamics, 40% of characters had married parents, 15% had parents who were divorced/separated, and 17% had single parents; as compared to 2% who had adoptive parents, 2% who had married/adopted parents, and 4% who had single/adoptive parents (see Table 1.2). However, 4% of the characters were recorded to have no parents and 15% of characters’ parents were not mentioned or brought into the shows plot (see Table 1.2). Of the shows analyzed, 15% of the characters came from That 70’s Show, 13% came from Everybody Hates Chris, 15% came from One Tree Hill, 13% comprised of characters from Gossip Girl, 13% from Smallville, 17% from Friday Night Lights, and 15% from 90210 (see Table 1.2).

Census 2000. Referencing the Census 2000 data set (see Table 1.3), 49% of the sampled population reported they were male, as compared to 51% female. When questioned on race, 75% responded Caucasian (which the Census groups as respondents who responded Hispanic (9%) and White (68%)) and 12% black. Inquiring about marital status, 54% of the sample consists of married parents, 12% consists of parents who are divorced/separated, and 7% consists of single parents (see Table 1.3).

Statistical Analysis
Content Analysis. Through a statistical analysis of data collected by the content analysis of television shows, we were not able to determine relationships between a character’s family dynamic and race, and family dynamic and gender.

As shown in Table 2.1, Caucasians were shown to have higher rates of divorced/separated/single parents (65%) than African-Americans (33%). These categories have been collapsed for purpose of analysis. African-Americans, on the other hand, were shown to experience the highest rate of married parents (67%) versus that of Caucasians (35%). However, the Hispanic character, being under-represented, was excluded from the chi-squares for purpose of statistical analysis. The categories of "No Information" and “Other” have been collapsed into “Divorced/Single/Separated” for purpose of analysis, as well. There was no statistically significant relationship found between family dynamics and the race of a character (see table 2.1). In regards to table 2.2, 37% of males and 45% of females had married parents. Furthermore, 33% of males and 30% females came from homes with divorced/separated/single parents. There was not a significant relationship found between family dynamics and gender.

Survey. Through statistical analysis, there were some relationships found between student perceptions’ of television’s accuracy and their gender. In table 3.1, 65% of females from the sample thought one gender was more over-represented than the other, while only 30% of males concurred. More males (31%) thought television equally represented both genders, versus the 30% of males who thought one gender was represented. There was no statistically significant relationship found between the participants gender and their opinions of television’s representation of gender (see table 3.1).

In regards to the subject of family dynamics, when asked about their opinion on television’s accuracy in representing family, the majority of respondents answered television did not
accurately represent family dynamics. According to Table 3.2, 69% that answered “No” were female, while 31% were male. On the other hand, 37% that answered “Yes” were male, while 63% were female. There was no statistically significant relationship found between the participants’ gender and their opinions of television’s representation of family (see table 3.2).

When asking the opinions of the participants in regards to television’s accuracy in representing family as compared to hours of television watched, 67% of the participants who believed television was inaccurate watched between 0-10 hours of television, as compared to 33% who watched over 11 hours of television. For those participants who believed that television was accurate in representing family, 77% watched between 0-10 hours of television, whereas 23% watched over 11 hours of television. Overall, there was no statistically significant relationship found between hours of television watched by the participants and their opinions on the accuracy of television’s representation of family (see table 3.3).

The participants’ opinion of television’s accuracy in representing gender in comparison to the hours of television watched by the participants was also examined. For the purpose of this analysis, we collapsed the hours of television watched into two categories, “0-10 hours” and “11+ hours”. Of those participants who believed that one gender was over-represented, 70% watched between 0-10 hours of television and 30% watched over 11 hours of television. Of the participants who believed that gender was equally represented on television, 66% watched between 0-10 hours of television, whereas, 34% watched over 11 hours of television. For the purposes of statistical analysis, we excluded the survey in which the participant identified its gender as “other”. However, there was no statistically significant relationship found between the hours of television watched by the participants and their opinion of television’s accuracy in representing gender (see table 3.4).
As seen in table 3.5, the opinions of television’s accuracy in representing race was also looked at, as compared to the hours of television watched by the participants. It was found that of the participants who believed that Caucasians were over-represented, 72% watched between 0-10 hours of television and 28% watched over 11 hours of television. Those participants who had other opinions on the representation of race comprised of 57% who watched between 0-10 hours of television and 43% who watched 11 or more hours of television. There was no statistically significant relationship found between the hours of television watched by the participant and their opinion on television’s accuracy on representing race (see table 3.5).

*Census 2000 v. Television Content Analysis.* Lastly, although any statistical significance comparing the difference between the populations of television and the United States was unable to be performed, there is a visual and mathematical difference in terms of the percentage. According to table 4.1, there was a +13.02% difference between television’s representation of Caucasians and that of the Census 2000 data. In the representation of African-Americans, there was a +7.02% difference, and a -7.27% difference in representing Hispanics between television and the United States (see Table 4.1). As for gender, there was an +8.35% difference between the two populations in representing males and females (see Table 4.1). Finally, there was a -13.97% difference between the two populations in representing married parents, 2.99% difference in representing divorced parents, and a 9.82% difference in representing single parents (see Table 4.1). Overall, although there is no proof of significant statistical difference, there does appear to be a percentile difference.

**DISCUSSION**

The main focus, when undergoing this study, was to determine if popular television shows, geared towards young adults, accurately portray race, gender, and family dynamic of their
intended audiences. In the case of the variables analyzed in the content analysis, television did not accurately portray reality, whether it was under-represented or over-represented. In the category of race, Caucasians and African-Americans were over-represented. However, Caucasians were represented more often than were African-Americans, which corresponds with what the *Census 2000* reports. When comparing the content analysis to the *Census 2000*, the findings revealed that the representation of family dynamics also varied. Families with married parents were under-represented and both divorced and single parents were over-represented. These findings validate the first part of the hypothesis that television falsely represents actual U.S. population characteristics.

However, the second part of our hypothesis, that students were unaware of television’s inaccuracies, was not justified by our findings. When asked if television shows accurately portray real life situations, 72% of the respondents answered “No”, indicating that they were aware of the inaccuracy of television. Also, the majority of respondents agreed with the findings from the content analysis of the television shows that Caucasians appeared more frequently on television. However, when discussing if a certain gender was over-represented, a majority of the respondents (42.7%) believed that both sexes were equally represented, which was not found to be true through the content analysis. In fact, females are under-represented and males are over-represented. Other than the perceptions of how gender is portrayed on television, most respondents recognized the inaccuracies we found to exist on television shows.

The findings that came from this research study have allowed the researchers to determine the degree to which television is accurate. Although the differences portrayed on television versus the statistics from the *Census 2000* were not huge, there is still a false perception that what is presented on television is the actual population. These findings are important and meaningful to
this field of study, because not only do they add to the literature on the topic; but they also
determine that television is unrepresentative of the population. Every aspect that was researched
in this study had a different level of misrepresentation. Although the survey participants
recognized that television did not typically reflect reality, they were unable to distinguish every
misrepresentation accurately. Therefore, making them unaware of the potential impacts of the
television shows they are watching. As a result, we found that our study had a few minor flaws.

Overall, this study has implicated that there is a need for in depth research on television
and its inaccuracies and effects on its viewers. Despite a few minor faults, our study has
furthered the research of this topic, and has opened the door to more invasive studies. Above all,
we feel that a three-tier design, such as the one used, can help construct an appropriate
foundation for collecting and correlating data. Therefore, we hope that this study will and can
further the investigation of the media, and its inaccurate representation of the population.

LIMITATIONS

After collecting the data and analyzing the results of both the content analysis and the survey,
we determined that there is room for improvement in how the research was conducted. The
sampling strategy had some biases in it that could be altered in order to have the findings be
more generalizable to the population.

Survey

When choosing participants for the survey portion of the research, only University of New
Hampshire students were included, which is not a racially diverse area. Also, we only surveyed
college students in an entry-level Sociology class, consisting of mostly freshmen students. All of
these are factors make for a non-representative sample of the survey population. Also, the survey
itself did not have any questions regarding the specific shows we examined in the content analysis, and only asked about the participants’ perceptions of television in general. This is a potential negative aspect of the research design, because the participants may have different viewpoints when it comes to certain shows and their specific accuracy.

Census 2000

In terms of the Census 2000, the most recent data that was available in order to portray the actual population was from 2000. However, the shows chosen for the content analysis were shows that are airing today (i.e. 2009). To better analyze how representative these newer television shows are, it might be more effective and relevant to this research question to wait until the newest Census data is available. More so, it may be more relevant to choose the shows that match that year’s statistics.

Content Analysis

Furthermore, in regards to the content analysis, the television shows chosen were only geared towards an English-speaking audience and were young adult/teen based. Therefore, they perhaps excluded other popular shows and populations. Due to our method of choosing television shows, we only watched the first episode of each show; making that a limitation of our study, because family situations may change over the course of a season. On a similar note, when coding the television shows, we are not accounting for sexual orientation of the parents, which can be considered a weakness as well. Lastly, another potential bias arises in the coding process. During the content analysis, inter-coder reliability was not used due to time constraints. Overall, acknowledging these limitations may help with improvements in future research.
FUTURE RESEARCH

In general, the findings of this research study allude to the problem of television’s accuracy in the portrayal of the population. Overall, the majority of our survey participants watched between 0 and 15 hours of television each week; therefore, they are susceptible to television’s inaccuracies. However, the participants on the higher end of that spectrum are especially susceptible to these inaccuracies. This can also have a huge impact on how these young adults perceive the world. As a result, it would be interesting, as well as beneficial, for further research to be done to determine what impact these inaccuracies have on children/young adults. Although most of the participants in this study recognized that television inaccurately portrayed reality, they only consisted of college students who could more easily identify television’s fallacies as compared to younger children. More so, these findings promote further research for examining a younger age range of children that are watching these same shows, to see how the perceptions differ. Also, in order for these findings to be better generalizable to the population, it would be best to survey a more representative and larger sample to obtain more accurate results. It would also be more relevant to compare the findings to a more recent Census data set.
REFERENCES


