

Attitudes on Gender Roles in Families: A Study on Television Viewers

Dr. Beulah Rachel Rajarathnamani

Associate Professor
Department of Journalism & Communication
University of Madras, Chennai, India

Abstract: The portrayals of women and men on television programs are commonly patriarchal. Television emphasizes on patriarchal values in families through its content. This portrayal adversely affects the opinion on gender roles in families. Television viewers who spend more hours in front of television might support and accept the gender roles portrayed on television. This study attempts to find if amount of television viewing influences the attitude towards gender roles in families among homemakers.

Keywords: attitudes, gender roles, families, television viewers, homemakers.

I. INTRODUCTION

The institution of family which is the basic unit of society is probably most patriarchal. The family is also important for socializing the next generation in patriarchal values where the first lessons in hierarchy, subordination and discrimination are learnt. Boys learn to assert and dominate, whereas girls to submit. Media, especially television is considered to be one of the socializing agents in society. This study attempts to find if amount of television viewing influences the attitude towards gender roles in families among homemakers.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Media studies research has asserted that certain depictions of gender roles found in prime-time programming reinforce chauvinistic attitudes, solidifying stereotypes about women and their place in society (Press and Cole, 1999). Critical scholars have long argued that television's presentation of various patriarchal institutions creates barriers for women in society (e.g., Zoonen, 1996).

Prime-time entertainment television provides a forum where issues of human rights, race, the environment, and other important topics are discussed. In addition, the trials and tribulations that various characters have to go through when confronting these issues personalizes matters of public policy for the audience (Dow, 1996). Also Gamson (1999) argued that such portrayals have the potential to substantially shape individual-level opinion.

Traditional values about the status of women can be found in many programmes. These programmes feature either male characters in leadership positions or female characters in domestic, care-giving roles. Although these programmes at times may have a strong female lead character, they promote a more conservative perspective by elevating the nobility of motherhood as the defining characteristic of women (Dow, 1996). These kinds of portrayal of women are generally found in Indian soap operas and films. These stories are often set in rural environments where traditional roles for women are encouraged and are considered as accepted values and norms.

Certain programmes present women in positions of authority and directly discuss gender equality from liberal viewpoints. They reflect a progressive outlook regarding the status of women in society and what rights they should be given. These programmes are mainly set in urban environments and contain story lines that represent many of the problems facing women who are trying to ascertain themselves in work environments. In addition, they often portray workplace environments where women work alongside men or in leadership ranks over men. Many story lines deal

with some of the most common issues associated with women achieving equal status in society. Past research has shown that shows of this type have an effect on viewers' attitudes toward gender roles. These television programmes has an influence on how citizens come to understand social norms and lifestyle choices (Dow, 1996).

For those shows not set in an urban environment, many of the story lines revolve around the disagreement between a more sophisticated, or urbane, character and the village's traditional customs or provincial attitudes. Many programmes present strong-minded female characters who openly demand gender equality. In addition, many of the women in these shows are trying to balance career and family. Accordingly, these characterizations may play some role in the relationship between entertainment television consumption and attitudes concerning gender roles (Lee, 1995).

The relationships hypothesized in this research stem from content-focused studies, all of which allude to possible influences that grow from the depictions of women presented in one type of media content or another (Gamson, 1999). The empirical analyses conducted here serve as an example of how communication researchers can link television exposure with quantitative audience analysis.

Likewise, media effects research connected to these content studies have linked the totality of television with more traditional sex role stereotypes and conservative gender ideology. Signorielli (1989) analyzed general attitudes toward women among light and heavy television viewers and found relatively weak evidence for an effect of television viewing on opinions about the proper role for women in society. Similarly, Elsamer, Hasegawa, and Brain (1999) compared trends from the late 1960s to the early 1990s in the portrayal of women in prime-time television with General Social Survey data on attitudes concerning gender roles on the percentage of women in the workforce. They found a positive linear relationship between the proportion of female characters in prime-time television, the percentage of women in the workforce, and attitudes toward working women.

Some past empirical research has substantiated these claims. Miller and Reeves (1976) studied the relationship between television viewing and sex-role stereotypes in adolescents, focusing on children's contact with individual characters. They found that "exposure to counter stereotypical females portrayed on TV causes modifications in real life sex-role perceptions" (p. 48). Morgan, (1982) have found connection between television use and adolescents' attitudes toward sex roles.

According to Social Learning theory by Bandura (1977), audience learn by observing the media. When television portrays women in stereotypical ways then automatically audience learn those behaviours from the media and accept it as the norm. The social learning theory argues that audience are more likely to learn behaviors from content that they see frequently.

III. METHOD

This study attempts to find if amount of television viewing influences the attitude towards gender roles in families among television viewers. Data collected from 205 homemakers from Chennai was analyzed for this study.

IV. ANALYSIS

The continuous variable, number of hours of watching television on a day, is collapsed into categorical compound variable television exposure. Those who watch less than two hours of television on a day are labeled as low TV viewers. Medium TV viewers are those who watch more than two hours but less than four hours of television on a day. High TV viewers are those who watch more than four hours on a day.

A one –way analysis of variance was performed with the compound variable, TV exposure, as the independent variable on the following dependent variables.

1. Father should have greater authority than the mother in making decisions about raising children on TV exposure $F(2,201) = 7.439, p = .001$. A post hoc Tukey test was performed to see if any group was significantly different from the others. The test revealed that high TV viewers ($M = 3.15$) felt that father should have greater authority than the mother in making decisions about raising children than low TV viewers ($M = 2.38$). Also, the medium TV viewers ($M = 2.83$) felt the father should have greater authority than the mother in making decisions about raising children low TV viewers ($M = 2.38$).

2. Children come under the responsibility of the mother on TV exposure $F(2,201) = 2.835$, $p = .005$. A post hoc Tukey test was performed to see if any group was significantly different from the others. The test revealed that high TV viewers ($M = 3.87$) felt that children come under the responsibility of the mother than low TV viewers ($M = 3.20$).
3. Men take care of the finances needed for the home on TV exposure $F(2,201) = 5.358$, $p = .008$. A post hoc Tukey test was performed to see if any group was significantly different from the others. The test revealed that high TV viewers ($M = 3.65$) felt that men take care of the finances needed for the home than low TV viewers ($M = 3.28$).
4. Family is the overriding concern for women on TV exposure $F(2,201) = 3.654$, $p = .036$. A post hoc Tukey test was performed to see if any group was significantly different from the others. The test revealed that high TV viewers ($M = 1.94$) felt family is the overriding concern for women than low TV viewers ($M = 1.52$).
5. One must marry a woman who is less educated than himself, otherwise she will boss over him on TV exposure $F(2,201) = 3.019$, $p = .049$. A post hoc Tukey test was performed to see if any group was significantly different from the others. The test revealed that high TV viewers ($M = 2.35$) felt that one must marry a woman who is less educated than himself, otherwise she will boss over him than low TV viewers ($M = 1.99$).
6. She is the ideal wife who never disagrees with her husband in family matters on TV exposure $F(2,201) = 5.465$, $p = .008$. A post hoc Tukey test was performed to see if any group was significantly different from the others. The test revealed that high TV viewers ($M = 2.86$) felt that she is the ideal wife who never disagrees with her husband in family matters than low TV viewers ($M = 2.21$).
7. Household chores comes under the responsibility of the women on TV exposure $F(2,201) = 4.378$, $p = .016$. A post hoc Tukey test was performed to see if any group was significantly different from the others. The test revealed that high TV viewers ($M = 2.88$) felt that household chores comes under the responsibility of the women than low TV viewers ($M = 2.26$).

From the above study it is understood that the high TV viewers are the ones who feel that in the family, father should have greater authority than the mother in making decisions about raising children, since they are the ones who take care of the finances needed for the home. They also feel that children come under the responsibility of the mother, and family is the overriding concern for women. They stated that a man must marry a woman who is less educated than himself, otherwise she will boss over him. They also believe that the ideal wife will never disagree with her husband in family matters and household chores come under the responsibility of the women.

V. CONCLUSION

The study clearly reveals that hours of television viewing has an effect on the audience attitude on gender roles in families. The homemakers who view television for more hours seem to accept and reflect patriarchal gender roles in families shown on television. They support the patriarchal values and consider it as a norm in the society. Such portrayals only result in hindering the advancement of women. More inclusive portrayals in television content would be an important step towards advancement of women in the family and society.

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