

THE NATIONAL FAMILY AND PARENTING INSTITUTE:

SOAPS AND THE FAMILY

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CONCLUSIONS

Programmes in this sample of UK soap operas over the month of our study featured many aspects of the stresses and anxieties that confront families, for example, relationship problems, particularly trust and fidelity issues, teenage sexual behaviour, coping with illness, child care and financial difficulties for single mothers, balancing demands from employers and family, the difficulty of knowing whether help will be perceived as interference and assistance, the delicate balance between parents' control/guidance and adolescent need for autonomy especially in their relationship choices. Programmes generally presented issues from a number of perspectives with the result that viewers were not offered any ready-made solutions and there was no strong educational emphasis. Instead, viewers were left with the choice of whether and how to form their own opinions. Representations of 'the family' varied considerably among the programmes studied.

The radio programme, *The Archers*, featured both a higher proportion of upper or middle class characters and fewer broken families than any of the television programmes. It also tended to focus more on community activities, plans for community activities and affiliative behaviour involving concern about others and reflections on how others might feel about developments in their lives. Giving and receiving practical and emotional support were not uncommon, both between family members and across social groups. Support was generally shown to be well received and appropriate.

The longest running television programme, *Coronation Street*, featured as many broken families as the shortest running television show, *EastEnders*. It offered, possibly, the most creative solutions to problems associated with parental breakdown, highlighted the value of children, particularly adult children, to their parents, emphasised the importance of honesty in relationships and suggested that relationships outside the family network might be at least as important as those within it, particularly for older people. Paradoxically, it also showed some of the most caricatured and unrealistic characters, including a baby who appeared at times to be a doll yet, of all the programmes studied, was perhaps most successful at conveying a hint of family life from the child's perspective. Practical support-giving featured to some extent in relation to the work situation but emotional support and advice-giving were more common, particularly between single parents post-separation, and between adult children and parents,

but also between unrelated social acquaintances. Although some advice-giving met with initial resistance, its final outcome was always beneficial.

The two programmes broadcast since the 1980s both presented families as highly challenged though the nature of these challenges seemed quite distinct between programmes.

Brookside showed families reacting and interacting predominantly in crisis mode while *EastEnders* showed families interacting predominantly in conflict mode. *Brookside* featured the highest number of children and *EastEnders* the lowest. Each *Brookside* family was quite distinct from others and all functioned within a community context which appeared remarkably self-contained but not invulnerable to external threats. *Brookside* families were depicted as highly challenged by negative life events and were seen to draw mainly upon immediate and extended family networks to meet these challenges. While negotiating this assistance was occasionally problematic and outcomes could be less convenient for lower income relations, the mutual concern underpinning family obligations generally assured fairly satisfactory outcomes. Statutory agencies featured more highly in *Brookside* than in any other programme and tended to be included as a constituent component of adversity rather than as helpful, with the exception of paramedics and hospital staff. Although *Brookside* featured the highest number of children, the child's perspective rarely featured or was constructed as counter to the adult's perspective and not understood.

EastEnders depicted highly conflictive families, at odds with each other as well as with other families. While strong family loyalties were evident, attempts at mutual support often misfired, potential or actual violence were not avoided and infidelity featured highly. Anti-social behaviour was presented as affording social status among peers and police and prison services were shown to be ineffective, even obstructive, in respect of the well-being of family members. *EastEnders* contained the highest proportions of working-class and ethnic minority characters though the latter were largely confined to adult males of African-Caribbean origin rather than reflecting family lives in the more diverse communities actually present in London's East End. In respect of the distinction made by Liebes and Livingstone (1994) between US and UK family soap families, of the four programmes sampled, the *EastEnders* families resembled the US non-differentiated, highly conflictive families most closely, while *The Archers* resembled this model the least.

With respect to how 'true to life' the soap families in the sample programmes were, in a number of ways, they differed. Childless couple families were under-represented in all programmes as were single person households in all but *Coronation Street*. Households headed by a male and a female parent were under-represented in the television programmes but slightly over-represented in *The Archers*. Consequently, the family structure still most prevalent in society currently (75% of families) did not feature highly in any of the television programmes. An inevitable outcome of this is that these television programmes cannot be said to address the question of how the stresses of every day life are dealt with in the 'average family'. On the other hand, it is also true that none of the television programmes presented the 'intact, perfect and often antiseptic' (Signorielli and Moran, 2001¹) families that predominated in the early days of television broadcasting. These programmes tended to over-represent and romanticise white middle-class families, showing them as capable of solving challenges easily while, at the same time, showing fathers as authoritative and mothers as gender-role stereotyped home-makers, idealised, glamorous and unconnected with the labour market (Glennon and Butsch, 1982; Bundy, Thomson and Strapp, 1997).

Findings from audience research are inconsistent with respect to the potential effect of either departure from reality. Some researchers argue that over-representation of divorced families and single motherhood leads, particularly among heavy viewers, to beliefs that family breakdown is inevitable and to a tendency to under-estimate the difficulties associated with single parenthood (Signorielli and Morgan, 2001; Larson, 1996). Whether this effect is a direct one or the result of an accumulation of other factors such as television having displaced other activities among heavy viewers is unclear. Others, as already mentioned elsewhere (e.g. Buckingham, 1993), are more inclined to acknowledge the capacity even of younger viewers

¹ p.339

to show sophistication in their approach to programme content and may emphasise the role of family factors such as parental control and discussion of programmes, discipline, harmony, etc. in mediating the effect of programme impact. As it is well established in research on learning processes that making an effort after meaning leads to more effective learning and also widely accepted that soaps reflect "a refusal to impose single perspectives, conclusions, or evaluations on the openness of the text" (Liebes and Livingstone, 1994²), it seems unlikely that simple causal relationships will easily be found to exist between programme content and effect for the majority of viewers, at least. Instead, as Katz (1982) suggested, it seems more likely that television will have multitudinous, almost infinite effects, with unanticipated and cumulative effects possibly being as important as expected or individual ones: "I would argue, for example, that it is important to recognize that a single television picture, let alone a whole television programme, has multitudinous images, and that the whole effectiveness process is further complicated by the fact that individual viewers select programs depending on their attitudes, predispositions, values and standards" (Katz, 1982³).

None of the programmes featured interactions between adults and middle school age children very highly. On the whole, children under seventeen were not in the foreground of action or, when they were, were profiled as a problem and as occupying worlds very separate from those of the adults. Quite possibly, this phenomenon arises from practical difficulties faced by producers in employing child actors whose acting abilities may not lend themselves to more demanding parts or whose availability can be constrained by personal considerations such as educational needs (Richardson, 2002, personal communication) rather than from a disregard for the child's perspective. However, it does seem to suggest that family soaps may only be able to capture complex family interactions with subtlety in exceptional circumstances. If this limitation is also combined with a tendency to portray less effective models of family interaction, for example, authoritarian (autocratic, dictatorial, bossy) as opposed to the more effective authoritative parenting styles (responding appropriately to the child's developmental stage and with mutual respect), as well as high levels of verbal or physical violence, then the overall effect may be a genre which is less child-friendly than parents might desire pre-watershed.

This rather alarming conclusion may be mitigated, though, by the fact that producers of soaps, as we have seen in our small sample, present viewers with multiple perspectives on the range of issues that they include in shows. One very authoritarian parent ineffectively haranguing a child on and off throughout several programmes may be off-set by other more or less effective parent-child interactions or by being commented on by other characters, for example, other more sympathetic parents. Further, viewers' perceptions may be moderated by the context in which they view, for example by critical discussion with real life authoritative parents.

Soaps can represent very diverse families, have the potential to stimulate valuable debate and can have a very positive role to play in increasing public awareness of the needs of people in a wide range of situations though very often they tread a fine line between entertainment and education. This point was well illustrated by Keith Richardson, producer of *Emmerdale*, who told us, "The rules are to try and keep a reasonable balance of different kinds of families, both functional, dysfunctional, happily married, unhappily married, you know, to try and keep that mix about right...but the nature of the sort of ongoing story tends to mean that, ultimately, cracks will appear in even the best families at some point.. But I think the important point about soaps is, actually, that people do tune in regularly. I think most of them dip in and out three or four times a week and they are genuinely interested in the activities of the families, and if we were unsympathetic constantly, they would get very bored and depressed."

² p.718

³ p.269

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