

Illegitimacy and Television

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The disturbing statistics about illegitimacy in the United States have become all too familiar. Out-of-wedlock births have increased by 200 per cent during the past three decades, to the point that 33 per cent of the children born in this country are to single mothers, usually in their late teens or early twenties. Some predict that by the year 2000 the figure will climb to 40 per cent. Even more disturbing is the impact that single parenthood appears to have on children. For example, a child raised by an unmarried mother compared to one raised in an intact family is six times more likely to live in poverty, three times more likely to be expelled from school, twice as likely to drop out of high school, and three times more likely to suffer emotional problems. Another study conducted by the National Center for Juvenile Justice revealed that 56 per cent of the juveniles in correctional facilities came from single parent homes. For intact families the figure was 28 per cent. In short, some of America's most troubling social problems are associated with out-of-wedlock births – regardless of the debate as to the extent to which these are causally dependent on environmental or genetic factors.

Conservative thinkers have been most prominent in focusing the country's attention on illegitimacy, because they consider it to be the most destructive of all social ills. In fact, Charles Murray doubts that American society can survive if the epidemic of out-of-wedlock births continues. Murray has also pointed out that illegitimacy is no longer confined to the minority community: currently twenty-two per cent of all white births are to single mothers, and that figure is also rising.¹

To help combat the problem, two specific governmental solutions have been suggested. Foremost among these is the removal of economic incentives believed to encourage single parenthood, specifically the curbing of welfare payments to unwed mothers. In

¹ Murray, C. (1993), "The Coming White Underclass," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 29, A18

the Fall of 1995, Congress passed legislation that would have prohibited welfare benefits to unwed mothers if they were not living with a parent, relative, or legal guardian. Whether or not such provisions will ever become law in the U.S. remains to be seen, since President Clinton vetoed the legislation. The other proposed measure involves economic support for married couples with children – largely by way of tax breaks. This way of combatting illegitimacy by encouraging marriage seems far more likely to become law, since neither political party wants to be accused of being anti-family.

However, many who are concerned with the problem of illegitimacy feel that ultimately there is little that government can do to solve the problem. Rather, they believe that only a shift away from a sexually-charged culture that debases the sexual behavior of young people will bring about meaningful change. As former Secretary of Education William Bennett put it, "Political solutions are not ultimately the answer to problems that are at root moral and spiritual."² The answer, they claim, is to promote a return to what historian Gertrude Himmelfarb has termed "Victorian virtues." These involve a promotion of a sense of individual responsibility, self-restraint, respectability, and temperant behavior.³ These are perceived as being values which if internalized will guide the behavior of young people away from early and irresponsible sexual experience and the pregnancies that too often result. But how will this happen? Presumably government initiatives might help to send the message that illegitimacy is socially undesirable, and that strong, intact families are not only socially desirable but positively essential to society. Obviously, parents play an essential important role in the transmission of cultural values, but not the sole role by any means. In today's world other agencies, most notably television, play a significant role in the development of children. Hence parents need help from other segments of society.

Children, Television and Sex

Although much has been made recently of the potentially

² Bennett, W.J. (1995), "What To Do About Children," *Commentary*, March, 23-28

³ Himmelfarb, G. (1995), *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (Knopf, New York)

degrading effects of movies, rap music, and cyberspace, television would seem to have a far more pervasive impact on children. The typical child in the United States spends about twenty-five hours a week watching television. By the time a person has reached the age of eighteen they will have logged about 19,000 hours in front of the tube – more than any other activity except for sleep. Moreover, with parents spending less time with their children (20 per cent less since 1970), television's role in the socialization process has grown. As television researcher Donald R. Anderson of the University of Massachusetts put it in referring to television, "it fills the social gap once taken by parents, grandparents, schools, and church."⁴ It also goes without saying that parents have less time to monitor and supervise what their children watch.

Although the precise psychological impact of television is still open to question, it would be naive to assume that it is not significant. Any activity practiced so persistently as television-watching is likely to have meaningful effects. A 1988 study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education concluded that children, far from being turned into zombies, learn much from television, both good and bad. In terms of what they learn that is bad, the most researched subject has been violence, and the emerging conclusion is that television, while not creating copycat violence, does play a role in producing aggression in children. For instance researcher Susan Hearold, after reviewing 230 studies on television violence involving more than 100,000 subjects, concluded that viewing antisocial acts is positively associated with antisocial behavior.⁵

Much less research has been conducted about sex on television and its impacts on young people, but it seems reasonable to assume that something is going on for several reasons. First, consider the amount of sexual messages on television. One study found that there were 10.9 sexual behaviors per hour either physical, verbal, or implied. A study just published by Monique Ward of UCLA focused

⁴ Litwin, S. (1989), "Can You Trust TV As a Baby Sitter for Your Kids?," *TV Guide*, July 1, 1989, 20-22

⁵ Hearold, S. (1986), "A Synthesis of 1043 Effects of Television on Social Behavior," in, G. Comstock (Ed.), *Public Communication and Behavior* (Academic Press, Orlando, Florida)

on the shows most popular among children. The study revealed that on average 29 per cent of the interactions on those shows involved some sort of sexual talk.⁶ Perhaps it should not be surprising then that more than one-half the sexual situations and use of crude language occurred during the 8 o'clock family hour. Why so much sex during the so called family hour? The most obvious answer is competition. The Fox Network in order to gain a foothold began airing more sexually explicit shows like *Beverly Hills* and *Melrose Place* during the family hour. *Melrose Place*, whose story lines have included voyeurism, bondage, and sadomasochism, in addition to the heavy doses of more normal sexual behaviors. It's little wonder that children's sexual knowledge is far greater than a generation ago.

Once these shows gained rating's points the other networks felt compelled to follow suit. So for example, *Roseanne* was moved into the family hour slot, and even a show like the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, although not displaying overt sexuality, is now heavily laden with sexual innuendo. Of course high sexual content is not limited to prime time. If anything, talk shows, soap operas, and the tabloids are more sexually charged. In fact some critics maintain that these shows are increasingly making prime time look tame. (Approximately one-half the topics on talk shows are of a sexual nature.) So on any given day during the past couple of years kids could have watched Sally Jesse Raphael interview mothers who allow and even encourage their teenage daughters to have sex. Phil Donahue discussing fantasy dates with Penthouse Pets (with the Pets, of course, on stage), or Hard Copy's expose' on *Charlie Sheen's Porno Queens*. Moreover, these shows are often aired at times that working parents are unable to monitor their child's viewing, even if they wanted to.

Coupled with the sheer volume of sexual messages are the psychological effects involved. A great deal of research, including that conducted by Michael S. LaTour and Richard E. Pitts published in the *Journal of Advertising*, indicates that sex, like violence, gets the viewer's attention along with arousing them.⁷ Other research

⁶ Impoco, J. and M. Silver (1995), "Sex and Violence on TV," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 11, 62-69

⁷ LaTour, M.S. and R.E. Pitts (1990), "Female Nudity, Arousal, and Ad Response," *Journal of Advertising*, No.4, 51-62

including the classic studies by Albert Bandura have shown that children imitate adults. This is particularly true if the character is attractive and rewarded for their actions. Research also has demonstrated that watching others perform acts tends to lower the viewer's own inhibitions. For instance, Dolf Zillmann conducted an experiment in which male and female undergraduates regularly viewed sexually explicit films. After several weeks of exposure Zillman found that his subjects were more accepting of both premarital and extramarital sexual behavior than before the experiment began.⁸

If TV does have these effects then parents have something to worry about. As one TV critic and mother put it, "Kids know that all the teenagers on their favorite shows Do It – the only question is when." Adding to the problem is that portrayals of sexual intercourse on television usually take place between unmarried persons. A 1991 study by the American Family Association found that for every scene depicting sexual intercourse within marriage, 14 showed sex outside of marriage. Plus the fact that the overwhelming impression that television gives about sex is positive. Seldom are the negative consequences of sex portrayed, usually it's glamorized. Quite the opposite of what actually occurs when a teenager becomes pregnant.

Finally, psychological conditioning is at work on television, particularly in advertising. Typically a product is paired with some sexual stimuli. The viewer then associates their sexual feelings with the product, which the sponsor hopes will induce the viewer to make a purchase. Unfortunately with so many sexual messages on television, it's the sex that gets reinforced. In fact a study conducted by Wayne Alexander and Ben Judd Jr. published in the *Journal of Advertising Research*, found that when advertisements use sexual stimuli, the viewer tends to remember more about the sex than the product itself.⁹

What's to be made of all this? Certainly television is not the

⁸ Zillmann, D. (1989), "Effects of Prolonged Consumption of Pornography," in, D. Zillmann and J. Bryant (Eds.) *Pornography: Research Advances and Policy Considerations* (Erlbaum, Hillsdale, New Jersey)

⁹ Alexander, W. and B. Judd (1978), "Do Nudes Enhance Brand Recall?" *Journal of Advertising Research*, February, 47-51

only factor involved in shaping a young person's sexual values and behavior. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that television is an important part of the mix when one considers the amount of time young people spend watching television, the volume of sexual messages aired, coupled with the various psychological factors involved. Moreover Christopher Jencks, in his book *Rethinking Social Policy*, argues that TV and illegitimacy must be linked, simply because other factors cannot explain the rising numbers of middle class teen pregnancies.¹⁰ Factors such as welfare payments and lack of job for males that are used to explain teen pregnancies in the inner cities, are not common to the middle class.

Public Reactions

Public concerns about sex on television appear to be increasing. A survey conducted by *MediaWeek* in 1993 revealed that two-thirds of adults found the sexual content of shows offensive.¹¹ More recently, a *Time*/Yankelovich poll found that 70 per cent of its respondents were disturbed by the amount of sex on TV, and a 1995 *USA Today* survey of 65,142 adults, found that 96 per cent were concerned about sexual content on television. Somewhat surprisingly, the respondents in this survey said they were more troubled by sex than the violence on television by a 48 to 40 per cent margin.¹² These kinds of numbers suggest that it's more than the Christian Coalition and conservatives who are upset. Indeed if the polls are accurate, it would seem that a majority of the public believes that things have gone too far and wonder what sexual boundary will be crossed next.

It might come as a surprise to many of those surveyed that all four of the major networks have offices of standards, that ostensibly monitor their programs for "taste and content". As one ABC executive stated, "we take full responsibility for our programs and we think we're responding to the heightened sensitivity by editing our

¹⁰ Jencks, C. (1992), *Rethinking Social Policy* (Basic Books, New York)

¹¹ Krumpalisch, K. and A. Browner (1993), "Public Enemy No. 1?," *MediaWeek*, November 1, 18-22

¹² Olmstead, D. and G. Anders (1995), "Turned Off: TV Survey," *USA Today Weekend*, June 2-4, 4-6

programs very carefully." ABC also provides a list of shows with "viewer advisories" that anyone can receive by calling a toll-free number.

Yet judging by the public response whatever the networks have done is not considered to be enough. The message that seems to be emerging is that what's good for television may not be good for society, and that the industry needs to reassess the sexual content of its programs. Something that the industry has been reluctant to do. The obvious reason is that what appears on television is there because various business interests (networks, sponsors etc.) hope to profit from it, and in that regard there is little doubt that sex sells. If ratings are down or a product isn't selling, turning up the sexual quotient is a formula that gets results. And the formula, if anything, seems to be becoming more popular. One TV critic after reviewing the network line-ups for the new season concluded that more sex was in the offing, not less.

Some have come to view the situation as so serious that the only government censorship will work. Yet censorship is something that many Americans find discomforting. We value the concept of free speech, and for that reason television has received a great deal of leeway in regard to what it chooses to air. However it now appears that increasing numbers of Americans feel that the power given to television is being abused. Hence the industry needs to do something to alleviate public concerns, and also because reasonable arguments can be made that television contributes to the serious and growing problem of illegitimacy.

Restraint and a Ratings System

Positive action can begin with individual organizations exercising restraint in regard to sexual content, the same value that many believe needs to be instilled in our children. There is some precedent for such actions. For instance, both Sears and Chrysler pulled advertising spots from the NBC show *Nightingales*, in part, because of the show's explicit sexual nature. Networks and individual stations have also refused to run some sexually charged commercials. Fifteen years ago several stations banned a Calvin Klein ad featuring Brooke Shields purring, "Nothing gets between me and my Calvins." In 1990 ABC, NBC, and CBS all rejected an ad for Jovan Musk. Although ABC did show it, once changes were made. Local affiliates have

refused to air certain network programs. Most recently, some local stations refused to show the initial episode of *NYPD Blue* because of nudity and one crotch-grabbing scene. And in fairness, network censors do require that content be changed or toned down when deemed to be too offensive. For example, the nude sequence in the initial episode of *NYPD Blue* was cut by 15 seconds to make it more palatable. Fox officials found one episode of *Married With Children* so offensive that it was not aired. Nonetheless, restraint on the part of individual organizations, although to be encouraged and applauded, appears to be random in nature, lacking any consistency. Thus for meaningful change to occur, the television industry needs to act collectively, and in this regard there is some good news.

In February of this year, the television industry announced that they would formulate a ratings system for their shows by January 1997. To this point few details have been released about the exact nature of the ratings, other than the system will be more comprehensive than the one used by the motion picture industry. Both the networks and cable companies will rate their own shows. However, an industrywide committee would monitor the ratings periodically to ensure their accuracy.

The decision to develop a ratings system came after intense pressure was applied by certain members of Congress and the White House. Plus the fact that the new telecommunications bill gives the FCC the authority to appoint an advisory committee to formulate a ratings system, if the industry fails to do so. The networks had always resisted a ratings system on the grounds that it amounted to censorship, but more importantly, because they feared a loss of advertising revenue. Specifically, the industry worried that if a show received an "R" rating advertisers would be scared off for fear of public indignation. This could happen particularly in the short-run. But on the other hand, it seems just as likely that shows rated "G" or "PG" could be targeted for more advertising dollars.

A ratings system seems long over due when one considers how network standards are established. As mentioned, each network does have a standards review board. Unfortunately no one seems to know what the standards are. Steven Bochco, co-creator of *NYPD Blue*, maintains that the reality is there are no standards. Bochco states, "Broadcast standards are what they eventually let you do, and that

becomes the new standard."¹³ Bochco's comments appear to be right on the money. In the 1950s the word pregnant could not be mentioned on television. Rob and Laura on the *Dick Van Dyke Show* slept in separate beds. In the 1960s Barbara Eden's bellybutton was not shown on *I Dream of Jeannie*. But gradually new sexual boundaries were established by shows like *Hill Street Blues*, *Nightingales*, and *Married With Children*. So that today varying degrees of nudity, passionate embraces, and graphic language, along with the appropriate grunts and groans are commonplace, and apparently represent the current standard. How far this process will go is anybody's guess. Thus it seems obvious that television needs some basis on which to make judgments about sexual content, and a ratings system can certainly play an important role, since ratings must be based on some criteria. Moreover, if sponsors do become sensitive to "R" ratings, this could quell marketplace pressures that drive television executives to include more and more sex in their programming. In this regard, a *MediaWeek* survey of advertisers revealed that 70 per cent said that if a ratings system was implemented, they would pay attention to it.

Perhaps more than any other measure, a rating system will allow parents to make prudent decisions about what their children watch. Presumably ratings will be published in the various television listings, helping parents to determine the appropriateness of a program. Currently about one-half the parents surveyed say they monitor their children's viewing. A ratings system will only encourage more parents to pay attention to programming. Polls also indicate that a rating system will be popular. For example, the *USA Today* survey found that 83 per cent of the respondents now favor a rating system.

Besides a rating's system, the new telecommunications bill requires that beginning in two years (barring lawsuits) each television set sold in the U.S. must be equipped with a v-chip. The chip would send a signal over the airwaves alerting parents about a particular program's level of violence, sex, and profanity. To do so the chip would interpret a code embedded in the videotape.¹⁴

¹³ Rensin, D. (1993) "Interview: Steven Bochco," *TV Guide*, August 14, 14-19

¹⁴ Zoglin, R. (1996), "Chips Ahoy," *Time*, February 19, 58-61

Regardless of one's philosophical views about the chip, the technology has some practical limitations when compared to a ratings system. First, since it's not realistic to retrofit existing sets, only new TV's will be equipped with the chip. Taking into account that the average TV now lasts eleven years, it could take a considerable amount of time for the majority of parents to make use of the technology. Secondly, the v-chip wouldn't provide as much information as would a comprehensive ratings system. As currently envisioned, programs would receive a rating of 0 to 5, with 0 being the least objectionable, and 5 the most objectionable in terms of violence and sex. Parents would then set the level of programs they desired. However, such a limited range does not provide parents with specific information on which to make judgments. This could be particularly important when one considers the different age-levels of children within a family. Obviously what is appropriate for a 14 year old may not be for a 7 year old. Finally, in this computer age where children's knowledge of electronic devices is ever increasing, many ingenious kids will discover ways to circumvent or manipulate the technology so that they can watch the shows they want.

Nonetheless, the development of a ratings system and the v-chip should give parents more control in determining what shows their children watch. This may help parents to nurture the values that will guide their children away from early sexual activity, but it needs to become more widely recognized that television has become an integral part in the life of a child, and that the sexual content of programs may be promoting social ills. Increasing levels of restraint, along with ratings and the v-chip should meantime play some role in lessening illegitimacy.

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BOOK REVIEW**How Good is your Country?***by Raymond C. Cattell*

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ISBN 0-941694-44-5 Paperback. 120 pages. \$16

Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Research Psychology, Raymond C. Cattell, a pre-eminent authority on personality testing, has produced a seminal work proposing quantifiable methods of assessing the behavioral potential of large groups – or, in short, a formula for assessing and comparing the syntality or personality profile of the populations of different nations.

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Ian McNish