



Representations of Aging, Older Adults & Caregiving on Prime Time Television

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Method

Since 2003, Hollywood, Health & Society's TV Monitoring Project has examined the frequency and prominence of health depictions in the most popular prime time television shows. In 2019, we analyzed 15 shows, representing the top 10 broadcast, scripted, English-language shows in the 18-49 age demographic, for each of three audience groups composite (general audience), Hispanic, and African American.

Within each new episode that aired between January and May (163 episodes), coders were trained to analyze:

- The number of mature adult (age 50-64) and older adult (age 65+) speaking characters and major characters;
 - Up to four older adult speaking characters per episode (154 characters) were further analyzed for the setting(s) in which they were depicted and their perceived quality of life;
- Interactions between patients and health care providers;
 - Up to five patient-provider interactions per episode (161 interactions) were examined for the provider's occupation and the presence of behaviors indicative of person-centered care;
- The prominence of depictions of aging, Alzheimer's Disease/dementia, and caring for an older adult;
 - Depictions of caring for an older adult (9 depictions) were coded for the type of caregiver and (if family member) the age of the caregiver.

Results

Mature and Older Adult Characters

- Older adults continue to be underrepresented on TV. Just 25% of episodes had two or more older adult speaking characters, and 19% had two or more older adult major characters.
- When older adults were depicted, they were usually shown as having a positive quality of life (89% of characters) and relatively rarely depicted in medical settings (14% of characters). They were more likely to be portrayed in home, work, or community/social settings.

Patient-Provider Interactions

- One third of episodes had any patient-provider interactions. The majority of providers (79%) were specialist doctors.
- Person-centered care was evident in every patient-provider interaction, but some behaviors were much more likely to be portrayed than others. Rarely did the provider give the patient educational material, help them to navigate resources, ask about psychosocial issues, or act in a culturally sensitive manner.

Prominence of Depictions

- A total of 19 episodes depicted aging, 3 depicted Alzheimer's Disease or dementia, and 9 depicted caring for an older adult. Dialogue and storyline-level depictions were relatively rare, with the exception of caring for an older adult.
- Depictions of caregiving most often featured health care providers, not family members.

METHOD

Sample

Since 2003, Hollywood, Health & Society's TV Monitoring Project has examined the frequency and prominence of health depictions in the most popular prime time television shows. Each year, the study sample is constructed based on Nielsen ratings in various audience demographics. Each new episode that airs between January and May of that year is analyzed and entered into a database.

The 2019 sample consisted of the top 10 broadcast, scripted, English-language shows in the 18-49 age demographic, for each of three audience groups (November 2018):

1. Composite (general audience)
2. Hispanic
3. African American

The final sample included 163 episodes across 15 shows. The number of episodes per show ranged from 7 to 17. The majority of episodes (61%) were from drama programs, and the remainder were categorized as comedies. ABC was the most represented network (36% of episodes), followed by NBC and CBS, and then by FOX. The CW did not have any shows in the sample.

TV Show	Network	Genre	N Episodes	% Episodes
9-1-1	FOX	Drama	8	4.9
Big Bang Theory	CBS	Comedy	14	8.6
Black-ish	ABC	Comedy	15	9.2
Chicago PD	NBC	Drama	13	8.0
Empire	FOX	Drama	9	5.5
The Good Doctor	ABC	Drama	8	4.9
Grey's Anatomy	ABC	Drama	17	10.4
How to Get Away With Murder	ABC	Drama	7	4.3
Manifest	NBC	Drama	7	4.3
Modern Family	ABC	Comedy	12	7.4
The Neighborhood	CBS	Comedy	10	6.1
New Amsterdam	NBC	Drama	13	8.0
Star	FOX	Drama	9	5.5
This is Us	NBC	Drama	9	5.5
Young Sheldon	CBS	Comedy	12	7.4

Mature and Older Adult Characters

Within each episode (N = 163), coders tracked the number of mature adult (age 50-64) and older adult (age 65+) speaking characters and major characters.

- Speaking character: a character that has at least one line (5 words) of dialogue and is clearly visible on camera. Do not include character who yells “yeah!” or “get him!” as this would not constitute a line of dialogue. If there is a large crowd of people and it is difficult to determine which character is speaking, then the character is not clearly visible.
- Major character: a speaking character that plays a significant role in the storyline of the episode. It is also likely they reappear regularly throughout the season and consistently play a role in the plot of the show, but the role they play in this particular episode is of greatest importance.

For up to the four most prominent older adult speaking characters per episode, the coders further analyzed the following variables at the *character* level (N = 154 characters):

- Setting(s) in which the character is depicted: Home/family, work, community/social, medical.
- Quality of life: if the character is depicted in a generally positive light (active, independent, able-bodied, generally healthy, mentally clear), they should be coded as positive. This code is also appropriate if there is no emphasis on the character’s age but they are depicted generally positively.

Patient-Provider Interactions

Within each episode, coders analyzed up to five interactions between an individual patient and an individual health care provider (i.e., patient-provider dyad).

- An interaction is defined as at least five lines of reciprocal dialogue. If the provider is talking to the patient, but the patient does not respond, this is not considered an interaction.
- The patient and their family members are considered a single unit. An interaction may be between the patient’s family and the provider (e.g., if the patient is unconscious or the provider speaks to the family in the waiting room). This is considered as if the provider is interacting with the patient.
- A patient-provider dyad is a single patient (or family members) and a single provider that interacts with the patient at some point during the episode. If, for example, an attending physician and a resident physician both converse with a patient, each exceeding the five-line threshold, two separate interactions are recorded. Multiple dialogues between the same patient and provider are counted as a single interaction.

At the patient-provider interaction level (N = 161 interactions/dyads), coders analyzed the provider's occupation and the presence of 17 behaviors indicative of person-centered care (adapted from Jain & Slater, 2013).

Prominence of Depictions

Finally, each episode was coded for the presence of depictions of aging/older adults, Alzheimer's Disease/dementia, and caring for an older adult. The prominence level of each depiction was analyzed:

- Visual cue: poster or prop with a health message (excludes things like medical equipment)
- Brief mention: passing mention; name dropping with no further information/comments (may include some visual only depictions if more substantial than a poster or prop)
- Dialogue: more conversation than a brief mention, yet does not rise to the level of a storyline; depiction or discussion contained within a single scene (may include some visual only depictions if they are the focal point of the scene)
- Storyline: depiction or discussion that cuts across more than one scene (may be the primary focus of the episode or a secondary plot line)

For those episodes in which a caregiver for an older adult was depicted, coders analyzed the type of caregiver and age (for family members).

RESULTS

Mature and Older Adult Characters

Eighty percent of episodes had at least one mature adult (age 50-64) speaking character and 54.6% had at least two. Mature adults were somewhat less likely to be major characters. Sixty-three percent of episodes had at least one mature adult major character and just 35% had at least two.

Episodes with Mature Adults (N = 163)	Speaking Character		Major Character	
	N	%	N	%
Episodes with 0 characters	36	22.1	60	36.8
Episodes with 1 characters	38	23.3	46	28.2
Episodes with 2 characters	43	26.4	35	21.5
Episodes with 3 characters	18	11.0	14	8.6
Episodes with 4 or more characters	28	17.2	8	4.9

Older adult characters (age 65+) were less frequently depicted than mature adults. Fifty-seven percent of episodes had at least one older adult speaking character and only 24.6% had at least two. Just 45% of episodes had any older adult major characters and 19% had two or more.

Episodes with Older Adults (N = 163)	Speaking Character		Major Character	
	N	%	N	%
Episodes with 0 characters	70	42.9	90	55.2
Episodes with 1 characters	53	32.5	42	25.8
Episodes with 2 characters	20	12.3	24	14.7
Episodes with 3 characters	12	7.4	4	2.5
Episodes with 4 or more characters	8	4.9	3	1.8

A total of 154 older adult *speaking* characters were analyzed. Nearly half (48.7%) were depicted in a home or family setting. Work (37.0%) and community/social (29.9%) settings were also common. Only 14.3% were depicted in a medical setting. The vast majority (89.0%) were rated as having a positive quality of life.

Older Adult Characters (N = 154)	N	%
Setting (Check all that apply)		
Home/family	75	48.7
Work	57	37.0
Community/Social	46	29.9
Medical	22	14.3

Other	10	6.5
Quality of Life		
Positive	137	89.0
Neutral	8	5.2
Negative	9	5.8

Patient-Provider Interactions

Of 163 episodes, 54 (33.1%) had any patient-provider interactions. A total of 161 patient-provider dyads were coded (up to 5 per episode). The vast majority of providers (78.9%) were specialist doctors. Smaller proportions were generalists, nurses, or mental health professionals.

Provider Occupation (N = 161)	N	%
Doctor (Generalist)	14	8.7
Doctor (Specialist)	127	78.9
Nurse	6	3.7
Mental Health Professional	12	7.5

All interactions had at least one behavioral indicator of person-centered care. The most commonly depicted person-centered care behaviors included the provider having eye contact (85.7% of interactions), active listening (71.4%), good manners (68.9%), and empathetic non-verbal expressions (66.5%). Rarely did the provider give the patient educational material, help them to navigate resources, ask about psychosocial issues, or act in a culturally sensitive manner.

Person-Centered Care Behaviors (N = 161; Check all that apply)	N	%
Provider had good eye contact with the patient.	138	85.7
Provider seemed to listen actively to the patient.	115	71.4
Provider had good manners - provider was courteous, for example: greeted patients when came in the room; introduced himself/herself to the patient; informed the patient about the procedure before doing it.	111	68.9
Provider had empathetic non-verbal expressions (e.g., forward lean, direct body orientation, uncrossed arms/legs, and light touch).	107	66.5
Provider answered patient's questions.	94	58.4
Provider asked questions of patient	87	54.0

Provider provided additional info related to disease/health (other than answering questions).	76	47.2
Provider and patient engaged in casual/social conversation – ANY conversation that does not relate to the disease or the patient’s health	64	39.8
Provider had empathetic verbal expressions (e.g., “I understand...”; “I see you are feeling...”).	56	34.8
Humor was used in the interaction – a remark made by the provider in an attempt to make the patient laugh/feel amused. This could be related to disease or something else.	52	32.3
Provider engaged in self-disclosure - revealed personal information about himself or herself to the patient (e.g. revealing wedding plans/difficulties and other lifestyle issues/ interpersonal issues/ work issues).	32	19.9
Provider was culturally sensitive - respectful of differences in cultural practices and tolerant of language issues (if applicable).	19	11.8
Provider helped patient navigate resources (e.g., insurance companies, providing referrals to see other physicians, helping with the lab work and other procedures)	15	9.3
Provider gave compliments to the patient - provider uttered an expression of praise, commendation, admiration, and/or congratulation. (e.g. you look well today; you seemed to have taken care of yourself).	14	8.7
Provider asked patient about psychosocial issues (e.g., home life, routines, caregivers) about psychosocial issues (e.g., home life, routines, caregivers)	10	6.3
Provider provided patient education material to the patient (e.g., link to websites, printed material, support groups, audio visual material, arranging for the educator to come to the patient)	8	5.0
Provider asked patient to repeat instructions.	2	1.2

Prominence of Depictions

A total of 19 episodes (11.7% of all episodes) had depictions of aging. These included 1 visual cue, 18 brief mentions, 4 dialogues, and 3 storylines. Three episodes had depictions of Alzheimer's Disease or dementia, including 1 visual cue, 2 brief mentions, and 1 dialogue. Nine episodes included depictions of caring for an older adult: 1 visual cue, 2 dialogues, and 6 storylines.

	Episodes	Prominence Level			
		Visual Cue	Brief Mention	Dialogue	Storyline
Aging	19	1	18	4	3
Alzheimer's Disease / Dementia	3	1	2	1	0
Caring for an older adult	9	1	0	2	6

Of the 9 episodes in which a caregiver was depicted, 6 had a medical professional providing care, 1 had an in-home care provider, and 2 had adult children. One of the adult children was coded as a Millennial (18-37) and the other was coded as Gen X (38-52).

Caregiver Depicted (N = 9)	N	%
Type of Caregiver		
Medical Professional	6	66.6
In-home care provider	1	11.1
Adult child	2	22.2
Caregiver age if family (N = 2)		
18-37 (Millennial)	1	50.0
38-52 (Gen X)	1	50.0

Each relevant dialogue and storyline is briefly described in the tables below.

Aging - Dialogues & Storylines (N = 7)			
Show	Episode	Prominence	Description
Grey's Anatomy	Girlfriend in a Coma	DIA	Catherine tells Richard that her OT made her feel like a "dried up old mop"

How to Get Away with Murder	Where Are Your Parents?	DIA	Annalise looks after her mother, mother forgetful but alzheimer's/dementia not explicitly mentioned
Grey's Anatomy	I Walk the Line	DIA	Koracick makes a joke about Lucy and Jules being "friends with retirement benefits" / Lucy attributes some of her symptoms to the fact that she's "Getting old"
New Amsterdam	King of Swords	DIA	Reynolds discusses his mom getting older
Modern Family	Yes-Woman	STO	Several of the characters are worried they are getting old
Modern Family	A Year of Birthdays	STO	The family reflects on a year of their birthdays
New Amsterdam	Anima Sola	STO	There is worry that a doctor is getting too old to practice medicine

Alzheimer's Disease / Dementia: Dialogues & Storylines (N = 1)

Show	Episode	Prominence	Description
Empire	In Loving Virtue	DIA	Lucious' mom has dementia

Caring for an Older Adult - Dialogues & Storylines (N = 8)

Show	Episode	Prominence	Description
Empire	In Loving Virtue	DIA	Lucious' mom is in a nursing home
Grey's Anatomy	Add it Up	DIA	Toby is afraid that she can't take care of her mom if her

			mom is paralyzed.
Star	Amazing Grace	STO	Calvin shown in medical setting
New Amsterdam	The Blues	STO	Caring for Ms. Medrano
New Amsterdam	King of Swords	STO	Max and Sharpe take care of Marlene
Grey's Anatomy	The Winner Takes All	STO	Meredith helps take care of her dying father throughout the episode, he also has a live-in hospice nurse
New Amsterdam	Six or Seven Minutes	STO	Old Woman needs surgery, but doesn't have good insurance
New Amsterdam	Croaklahoma	STO	The doctors determine if Mr. Brandt is able to care for himself