EMS3O

TV Stereotypes in the Media

Because most television programs are quite short, the identities of characters must be established as quickly as possible. To do this, television writers often use stereotypes. A stereotype is a fixed or conventional image of a person or group of people. Stereotypes generally conform to a pattern of dress and behavior that is easily recognized and understood. Often, a judgment is made about the person or group being stereotyped. That judgment may be positive or negative.

Generally, stereotypes are less real, more perfect, (or imperfect) and more predictable than their real-life counterparts. A typical male stereotype, for example, is of a "real man" who is adventurous, masterful, intelligent, and unshakable. Such sex-role stereotypes are intended to present viewers with a character they can easily recognize and relate to. Their danger, however, is that, if seen often, they can affect the way a viewer perceives men in general. Male stereotyping can narrow one's notion of what men can be and do; it can affect women's and children's expectations of men; it can even shape men's and boys' own views of themselves and of how they should behave.

While commercial television has improved in its portrayal of females, many of the women featured on TV continue to be depicted as someone's wife (apron-clad) or girlfriend (barely-clad). Television children are generally cast in gender related roles - the girls playing with dolls while the boys play at sports - and all are "cutesy" and talk as though they were insightful adults. Similarly, the characterization of mothers-in-law, the elderly, gays, police officers, and truck drivers tends toward the stereotypical.

Culture and class stereotypes are also prevalent in television. Traditionally, blacks were portrayed as either happy-go-lucky servants or dangerous criminals, and while these stereotypes linger, we are now seeing what might be described as upright, intelligent, middle-class black characters. Similarly, North American native peoples are now being portrayed as something other than buckskin-wearing teepee dwellers. Too often, however, minorities are portrayed stereotypically and almost never as powerful or rich as the white majority.

Because stereotyping can lead children to form false impressions of various societal groups, it is important that students recognize stereotypes and understand the role they play in television's portrayal of life. To become television-wise, then, students must tune in to the ways television treats people, recognize how they themselves relate to TV characters, and understand how these characters can influence their ideas about the real people in their communities.

1. Brainstorm words to describe a princess.

2. Using Disney films such as Snow White, Cinderella, One Hundred and One Dalmatians, The Little Mermaid, The Lion King, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin and Pocahontas as examples, brainstorm words to describe the following:

   • The step-mother
   • The handsome prince
   • The villain (male/female)
   • The hero
   • The heroine
   • Mothers
   • Fathers