

PERSPECTIVE

BY ALVIN F. POUSSANT, M.D.

THE HUXTABLES: Fact Or Fantasy?

THE most popular program on television for all four years of its existence, *The Cosby Show*, has been a spectacular success among both Black and White Americans—and people in many foreign countries as well. The Huxtable family projects universal values so appealing that viewers from a wide range of ethnic and social backgrounds can identify with the problems and triumphs of this lovable, but admittedly make-believe, upper-middle-class Black family.

The questions often asked are: Just how "make-believe" is this affluent household? How much is fact and how much is fantasy? Many people, including those who watch and enjoy the show, doubt that Black families like the Huxtables really exist, and they wonder if Cosby has created a new myth about the Black experience in America. Critics express their skepticism by asking, rhetorically, "The Huxtables don't represent a typical Black family, do they?" The answer is, "Of course not"; they are not a "typical" Black family, because this dual-career couple — physician-husband and lawyer-wife — represent only a small, but growing, segment of the Black population.

However, there are families like the Huxtables in many communities; in the past several decades, the number of Black professionals in America has more than tripled, and the Black middle class has grown significantly larger. Even though the characters are idealized, many two-career professional families, and many more average middle-class families, feel they have a lot in common with the Huxtables. In that sense, *The Cosby Show* does depict one aspect of Black "reality."

It surprises me when Black people claim that families who talk and act like the Huxtables do not exist. They probably mean that they personally do not know any such families. It is unfortunately true that upper-income families

— Black and White — have little or no social contact with families of lower socioeconomic levels. This division is accentuated by the physical distance between poor and affluent neighborhoods, which weakens the cohesion of the Black community. In addition, the Black upper middle class is seldom described in the media, because journalists have a tendency to focus on the problems of the poor Black

community, which is understandable, and to describe images they feel are "authentically Black" — that is, stereotypes of the underclass — which is less understandable.

Most TV sitcoms about Black families, like *Good Times*, *That's My Mama*, and *The Jeffersons*, portray characters from poor- or lower-middle-class backgrounds, using the shuckin' and jivin' street-wise styles that the general public associates with Blacks. Even dated clichés—for example, "Give me five!" and "Hey, man, wha's happenin'?" — are still mouthed by many Black television characters. It is naive, at the very least, to suppose that all, or even most, Blacks talk that way. White people should know this, and Black people certainly should. As opportunities for Blacks expand, it is

reasonable to expect that certain styles and actions, which might have typified past Black behavior, will change and vary widely in the future.

The Cosby Show is delivering this message to the American and world public. Despite its limitations as a half-hour sitcom, it has dramatically altered the image of Blacks as poor, downtrodden, yet happy-go-lucky clowns. The Huxtable family is helping to dispel old stereotypes and to move



The Huxtables, principals of the smash hit sitcom, *The Cosby Show*, have endeared themselves to millions of television viewers.

PERSPECTIVE features personal commentary on a wide range of topics that are of interest to EBONY readers. Dr. Alvin F. Poussant is an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a production consultant for *The Cosby Show*.

THE HUXTABLES *Continued*

its audience toward more realistic perceptions. Like Whites, Blacks on television should be portrayed in a full spectrum of roles and cultural styles, and no one should challenge the existence of such an array of styles within a pluralistic society.

The Huxtables, representing only one facet of the Black community, cannot possibly depict the full range of reality within Black family life and they don't even try. For example, the show has not fully explored some of the problems confronting two-career families: these parents always seem to be at home and available to the children, and the house is spotless with no evidence of anyone's having cleaned it. Such dramatic license is a hallmark of TV comedies. The sitcom formula also limits the range of what are considered appropriate story lines; audiences tune in to be entertained, not to be confronted with social problems. Critical social disorders, like racism, violence and drug abuse, rarely lend themselves to comic treatment; trying to deal with them on a sitcom could trivialize issues that deserve serious, thoughtful treatment.

It is certainly a compliment to *The*

Cosby Show that people expect much more from it than they do from other TV programs. But no one expects other sitcoms, Black or White, to examine social problems and offer profound solutions to the audience. Television should indeed address the full range of the Black experience in America, but that should be accomplished through drama series or by having existing programs confront Black issues along with those pertinent to other ethnic groups. Unfortunately, one legacy of racism is

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that only comic series have been deemed to be appropriate starring vehicles for Black actors; we need to pressure network executives to provide a wider variety of Black culture.

It should be apparent by now that *The Cosby Show* presents a high level of positive images that are far ahead of other Black sitcoms, and it is racist to suggest that the series is merely *Father*

Knows Best in blackface. The Black style of the characters is evident in their speech, intonations and nuances; Black art, music and dance are frequently displayed; Black authors and books are often mentioned; Black colleges and other institutions have been introduced on the show, perhaps for the first time on network television.

There is ample evidence to suggest that as the show has raised Black self-esteem, it has simultaneously lessened stereotypical views of Blacks among Whites. It is even possible that *The Cosby Show* will produce changes in American attitudes that are not yet apparent. But no one should suppose that because families like the Huxtables exist there are not at the same time many families who endure oppressive experiences in America; the evils of poverty and racism still trap millions of Blacks. The ongoing struggle against these conditions should not be diminished because of the affluence of Bill Cosby's television family.

The happy message of *The Cosby Show*, if anything, should raise the level of Black expectations and strengthen our determination to achieve full participation in the American Dream for all.

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