Living Room Wars: Power Relations and TV Viewing in the Egyptian ‘Upper-Middle’ Class

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Abstract: This paper examines how television can be utilized to analyze the different manifestations of power between family members in order to understand the discourse of power relations within the “upper-middle” class of Egyptian society.

Introduction: An Anthropology of Television

The television set among households in the Egyptian upper-middle class has become as ubiquitous as a notebook is to an anthropologist. With more than 70% of the Egyptian population owning a television set today, the TV set has been given significant cultural and familial importance. Yet, the anthropological study of television take a more Levi-Strauss structural approach to the television, mainly analyzing the context of TV shows focusing on the global/local meaning. In the following essay, I will use a more audience-structured approach, with my main focus on the family.

In order to understand the discourse of power relations within the context of the family, the television set will be used as a tool in order to analyze the Egyptian middle-class household. Aware of its expanding significance in the Egyptian middle class, I believe that the television has potential significance as a vehicle that expresses the different manner in which members of the family manifest indicators of power. Thus, the family stands as a unit that, in addition to viewing television, elucidates on the nature of power and within the household.

Objective of research and fieldwork

How does the television assist in demonstrating the familial power roles within the household? How are power relations defined within the family? In order to understand how power roles are constructed and defined within the family, I explored both the public and private spheres paying attention to the interplay between age and gender to status and authority. How is the access to the television set and control over the program choices delegated? How does the role of the father differ from the role of the other family members? Is there a pattern of unprecedented dominance within the family? And why does this dominant image prevail?
Conceptual Framework
In his work, *Television’s Role in Family Interactions*, Goodman (1983) underscores the importance and potential of the television. Television’s central position is demonstrated by the articulation of rules and decision-making inherent in any family. These moments are typically accompanied by conflict and dominance patterns. Goodman’s Marxist paradigm parallels my study in her focus on conflicting inequality of power distribution. James Lull’s ethnographic study on the selection of television programs at the home elaborates on the dominance of the father within the family. Lull argues that most members of the household are non-selective individuals; viewers who watch programs that are selected by someone else in the family. The locus of control in program selection processes can be explained primarily by family positioning. Lull envisioned the father’s superiority within the family, which he believed, help delegate other member’s individual role, status, and authority giving particular attention to the wife’s roles. His central finding portrays the father to be the individual who most often controls the selection of television programs. Furthermore, Radway’s study on women’s reading of romance fiction provides, as a qualifier to Lull, the manner in which novels function as a form of protest within the family.

While examining the public-private sphere of the household, I utilized Bourdieu’s analysis of the Berber house in his *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste* (2000). Bourdieu argues that the orientation of a household is fundamentally defined from the outside, from the masculine sphere. The masculine sphere is the place where men come out transforming the house to an empire within yet another empire.

Analysis: What does it mean to watch television?
The phrase “I’m going to watch television” demonstrates the choices made continuously by different member of the household. This ubiquitous phrase may be interpreted differently by the family members, but the location of the television they all watch remains the same. Throughout my fieldwork I observed the spatial positioning of the television. Is the television the center of the room? How much space does the family delegate to the television? Do specific rooms have television sets? For how long is the television set switched on during the day?

During one of my interviews, my informants had a guest over. The guest had lived abroad for most of their lives. Incidentally, the guest stated that he does not have a television at his own home as he did not feel the need for a television. At that same moment, my informant’s children innocently asked him, “Then what’s all your furniture pointing to?” While this statement was amusing, the television clearly occupied a central position for my informant’s household for even the parents questioned the guest’s statement. Noticeably, the television was kept on even when my informants were not watching it.
Sample Participant Observation on Spatial Arrangements

Through the spatial arrangement of the television and the furniture, I observed the dominant image of the father. The husbands and fathers utilized the spatial positioning of the room in order to reflect their status and their heightened roles within the family. For example, in Ibrahim’s household, he is the only one allowed to sit in the El Korsi El Kebir (The big chair). Moreover, Yasser, the father in my main informant’s household, had the power to kick Ali off the television in order to watch his soccer match. Likewise, he dominated the queen bed and Shadi and Ahmed sat on the floor and the chair. As a result, it is evident the males occupy a certain demarcated position not only in the room, but within the family. Lull’s vision of male superiority is extended as the fathers and husbands construct their power roles with the help of the spatial arrangement. Thus, the spatial arrangement comprises part of the social positioning within the family. Admittedly, there was no specific chair for the wives or the mothers.

The selection of programs was repeatedly chosen by the father. The father was observed by other members of the family to fully control the selection of television programs. In accordance with Lull, the husbands and fathers imposed control over the remote control and continuously changed the channels without consulting other members of the family. As demonstrated in Figure III, the fathers’ dominant tone is set by their decision over 36% of the channel choices, acting without consultation on more than 70% of his decisions. Through his disregard for others, the father portrays his dominance over other members of the family. Indeed in a patriarchal society, the power will necessarily be delegated to the father or husband for clearly they occupy the dominant role within the household.

The Gender and Age Factor

Watching television within the family also demonstrates how viewing choices are expressed and negotiated in relation to age and gender. Both age and gender are two structural principles that permeated my research. The formulation and enforcement of certain rules concerning the television demonstrates the differential access to the television set. This type of differential access occurred at two distinct levels: firstly between the children and their parents and secondly between the husband and wife.

In most of my informants' households, the living room was commonplace for the location of a television set. One night, Dina and Samir were staying up on a Thursday night in order to watch one of their favorite cartoon shows. As their parents entered the room, Dina and Samir tried to avoid them several times. Soon enough, after several minutes of arguing, the children were sent to their bedrooms. The rules their parents had set had been one reiterated to them many times: we’ve already discussed this, no TV after 11 on weekends. While Dina and Samir tried repeatedly to negotiate this rule, they were unsuccessful. The parents’ implementation of certain rules reinforces their status and authority.
within the household. Dina and Samir’s parents’ mechanisms of social control elaborate on their status as elders. Parents tend to confine their children’s access to the television in order to inhibit their children’s exposure to provocative content. Some families commented on the diversity of activities their children pursue because they do not watch television frequently. Through this portrayal of power, the parents cement their roles as the elders, in turn enforcing the differential access imposed on their children.

However, the parents’ rules change in relation to their children’s age. In several interviews, parents clearly indicated that access to the television set is increased when their children get older. According to Hala, my main informant, the older a child is, the more responsibilities he or she should get and older children should have the privilege to own their own TV. As demonstrated in the graph below, 5 families permitted some of their children to have television sets in their rooms. The children of all five families were above the age of 15. Thus, age is directly correlated with the amount of freedom a parent allows their children.

Within the parent-child relationship, gender plays a significant role in constructing status and authority. There permeated a dominant pattern of masculinity within the families I interviewed when all the aforementioned children of the five families were males. Throughout my research, the television was perceived by the sons as Shadi elaborates as his own possession. Shadi utilized the television set to assert their own domain and to refute interactions with their parents during times when “I really don’t want to talk with them”. In fact, Alia, Hala’s daughter, was noticeably much less concerned to with the television as she states “I watch the set less than he does”. Consistently, the male adolescents I interviewed were more concerned to portray the television as an object of resistance towards their parents rather than a commodity of leisure and privilege. As paralleled in Goodman's study, the dominant patterns and unequal distribution of power led to conflict within the family. The sons perceived the television as an object that is placed in their room to allow them more time in their domain. In contrast, the females spent less time in their room and thus felt no need for a television. Through my participant observation, the daughters were less concerned to distinguish themselves from their parents. The boys felt the need to rebel against their parents through demarcating their won private space within the house. Thus, the television set in the son’s room functions as a symbol to defy the parent’s authority and status. I believe that in a way, the sons create within their room an environment similar to the environment their parents create in the living room. For even when the parents exercise their authority and command the child to switch off the television, the television stands as a symbol attesting to the son’s maturity and responsibility. As Radway argues that novels function as protest for the women in households, I argue that the television in a boy’s room acts as a symbol of protest.

The time delegated to watching television is perceived differently by the husband and wife. Within society, the house is primarily defined as a site of leisure for
men. Throughout my fieldwork, the fathers were mostly preoccupied with the television program, relying on his wife to be the parent. Women, regardless if they work or not, often allude to their domestic sense of responsibility. For not only does the women parent her children, she is always serving tea, answering telephone calls, or finishing some chore while the father watches television. For example, Hala has worked ever since she has been married, even when she had her children, she continued working. However, to her the home was not the significant site of leisure. To her, the home represented more responsibilities, like cooking, cleaning, doing homework with my kids, and other things. To me, leisure would center on the opera, art galleries, and cultural performances. For me, the television is a source of leisure, but I only watch it when I m expecting a show to be on and never just randomly like my husband. Hala’s husband Fekry has different ideologies than his counterpart. To me the television is sort of a break from the reality: the reality of work and responsibilities. I come back home, turn the television on, and sit in front of it, rarely moving away. I don’t necessarily always watch it, but it’s always on. Thus, watching television, is perceived differently in the husband-wife relationship for while the husband is mesmerized with the television, the wives’ mobility within the house defines her role as a locus of responsibility.

For Hala, the television offers itself as a tool that marginalizes her imposed responsibilities. As Hoda elaborates, the television time is a time when she does not accept phone calls, prefers if other members of the family do not talk to her, and absolves herself from household chores. When I watch television, it is for specific reasons. This doesn’t mean the show is important but it has a more psychological effect on me. It helped me relax and then leaves me rejuvenated to help me finish the other responsibilities I have. As in the case with the son’s protest, Radway also explains that women tend to demarcate their private space. Likewise, Hala explains it is sort of saying this is my time so leave me alone. This is when I get my leisure time and my family knows that they are expected to respect my time. Therefore, the television functions to create boundaries for the women and as Radway argue acts as a “minimal, tacit from of protest for the women.”

The public and the private sphere of the family
In attempting to develop an analysis of the domestic function of communication and information technologies, we can usefully take Bourdieu’s analysis of the Berber house, where he offers an exemplary model for the articulation of public and private space, and of domestic technologies within gender relations. My argument affirms that division between public and private remain fundamentally articulated to gender and power relations. I observed that in accordance with the mode of social organization of my informants there is a fundamental distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere. Bourdieu formulates the relation between the domestic and the public as an opposition between female space and male space...and the openness of all social relations. This reaffirms
my aforementioned results that while conflict might exist, there is also cohesion between the family members. Bourdieu’s argues that the orientation of the house is fundamentally defined from the outside, from the point of view of the masculine, public sphere as the place from which men come out so that the house is an empire within an empire. Bourdieu’s theory clearly corresponds to my finding that power relations within the family are set with the dominant tone of the man. My central point concerns the relation of not only public-private, but more importantly, masculine-feminine and as long as the power relations are defined from the outside, the males will have greater access and power than the females.

With respect to my approach, I would say that I adopted Marxist framework approach mixed with an emphasis on gender. This is the case because I assume throughout this paper, that all social relations are empowered and based on power relations. Furthermore, conflict and relations of inequality help guide my analysis. Therefore, the criticism to this approach is closely related to the criticism of feminist anthropology and Marxism. One could never argue that class, race, or gender could every fully contain an informants social identity, and I am fully aware of that. Also one of the limitations of this essay, is that it fails to take into account the social construction of gender. Ang & Hermes forcefully emphasize their point, in their critique of current tendencies on emphasizing gender above all other factors. Their central point was not to deny gender differences, but rather to suggest that their meanings are always relative to particular construction of that specific society.

**Conclusion**

The television set has proven to bring out the actions of individuals in several manners and thus has confirmed the present unequal distribution of power with respect to age and gender. Also dominance and conflict patterns elaborate on how power can go both ways; for while the man has more power, the women and the male adolescents have manipulated the situations in different manners. Thus, the television in people’s lives has particular significance of articulating the relations within the household and it’s members. We are made aware of the power positions and how they are defined from both the inside and particularly, the outside. There is more to watching television that what is on the screen and that more is, centrally the domestic context in which viewing is conducted. Television certainly complements the construction of power relations yet enhances social relations. In the future, it would be interesting to conduct comparative fieldwork on how television articulates power roles within the family. And throughout these living room wars, the television set stands as a symbol for the power of access that is continually juggled with all the family members.
References


