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Abstract

How does a parent's or other adult's involvement in a child's TV viewing influence that child's responses to television? Much of the evidence on this question comes from experimental research. It has been shown that adult commentary can inhibit or intensify children's imitative responses to a visual medium; that mothers' comments can counteract children's tendencies to follow the dictates of a TV commercial; and that adult commentary can enhance children's comprehension of a TV program, as well as their retention of information and values presented on TV. Furthermore, studies in which mothers were merely encouraged to sit with their children (with no specific instructions as to what to say to them) while they were watching television have indicated that children learn more from the medium under such circumstances.

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Paul Messaris and Dennis Kerr

Children's beliefs about whether TV characters were representative or not related to mother's statements.

How does a parent's or other adult's involvement in a child's TV viewing influence that child's responses to television? Much of the evidence on this question comes from experimental research. It has been shown that adult commentary can inhibit or intensify children's imitative responses to a visual medium;¹ that mothers' comments can counteract children's tendencies to follow the dictates of a TV commercial;² and that adult commentary can enhance children's comprehension of a TV program,³ as well as their retention of information and values presented on TV.⁴ Furthermore, studies in which mothers were merely encouraged to sit with their children (with no specific instructions as to what to say to them) while they were watching television have indicated that children learn more from the medium under such circumstances.⁵

Survey findings are less clear in their implications for this relationship. Although several studies have shown that various features of family environment may condition children's or adolescents' responses to televised aggression⁶ or their beliefs about the degree of correspondence between television and reality⁷, these studies were not, for the most part, concerned with parental behavior explicitly addressed to their children's TV viewing. Consequently, "real-world" (as opposed to laboratory) information on the consequences of such behavior is still lacking. The present study is an attempt to develop information of this sort.

On the basis of parallel interviews with mothers and children, the study investigates connections between mothers' television-related interactions with their children and children's perceptions of television characters. In particular, the following four aspects of children's perceptions are examined: a) children's beliefs about the degree to which TV characters are representative of real-life people; b) children's identification with TV characters; c) children's awareness of TV characters' authority or power relationships with other TV characters; d) children's knowledge about the occupational roles portrayed by TV characters. The first two areas were included in this study because of broad concern that both types of perceptions may condition television's contribution to children's subsequent behavior.⁸ Furthermore, both of these aspects of children's perceptions have been linked to such general features of family background as race or social class, suggesting that parental influence on these responses might be an important topic to investigate.⁹ The latter two areas were included because of previous research linking television both to children's beliefs about power and authority and to their occupational knowledge.¹⁰

Method

Interviews were conducted with 296 mothers and 296 children, residents of a large city in the eastern United States. All participants were volunteers. The children were recruited in approximately equal numbers from grades one, three and five of three elementary schools in the city.¹¹

The children were interviewed individually at their schools. The interviews were based on a set of photographs of eight television characters appearing in programs which were being broadcast

on local stations at the time of the study.¹² The children were shown photographs of these eight TV characters in random order and, for each character with whom they were familiar, they were asked a series of open-ended questions on several aspects of their perceptions of these characters, which will be described below.

The interviews with the mothers were conducted by telephone and consisted entirely of closed items. In addition to supplying demographic information and other background data, the mothers were asked a series of questions about various kinds of involvement in their children's television viewing. The interview was focused only on the child who had been interviewed at school, and the mother was asked to report only on patterns of interaction within the previous six months.

Mothers were asked about the frequency with which they watched or discussed with their children the programs from which the eight TV characters were drawn. These were measured on a four-point scale ("never"=0; "rarely"= 1; "sometimes"=2; "often"=3) in response to the questions: "How often do you watch [name of program] with [name of child]?" and "How often do you talk about [name of program] or about people who're on [name of program] with [name of child]?" The overall frequency with which they watched television with their children was measured in hours, in answer to the question: "Approximately how many hours of television would you estimate that you and [name of child] watch *together*, in each other's company, on the average day?" Measurement of the frequency of specific kinds of TV- related comments will be described below, in conjunction with the presentation of the findings.

Results

Perceived Representativeness of TV Characters. Children's beliefs in the degree to which each TV character was representative of real-life people were measured through the following question: "Do you think there are a lot of people like [name of character] in the world, or not that many, or none at all?" Responses were coded on a three-point scale, ranging from 0 ("none at all") to 2 ("a lot"). Each child's eight responses (one for each TV character) were summed into a single index of perceived representativeness of TV characters (range 0-16).¹³ This index is used as the dependent variable in the first analysis. Two additional types of parental behavior were measured for specific application to this area: frequency of mothers' statements that aspects of TV are "make-believe" and frequency of statements that aspects of TV are *not* "make-believe".¹⁴

Mothers' statements that television is *not* make-believe were positively correlated with children's beliefs in the representativeness of the TV characters (fifth-order partial $r = .11$, $p < .05$, although the simple correlation was not significant).¹⁵ Conversely, mothers' statements that television *is* make-believe were negatively correlated with children's beliefs in the representativeness of the TV characters (simple $r = -.17$, fifth-order partial $r = -.11$, both significant at $p < .05$).

Less obvious relationships between children's perceptions of the representativeness of TV characters and maternal behavior were found for two related aspects of mothers' involvement in their children's viewing of the specific programs in which these characters appear: first, the frequency with which mothers talk about these programs with their children, and, second, the frequency of mother-child co-viewing of these programs. (Both variables were weighted indexes derived from the individual-program frequencies.) Both variables had significant simple

correlations with the children's perceptions of the representativeness of the TV characters drawn from these programs,¹⁶ but both correlations were weakened by the controls, and only mother-child co-viewing had a significant fifth-order partial correlation ($r = .11$, $p < .05$) with the children's perceptions. On the other hand, general mother-child co-viewing (i.e., co-viewing of all programs, rather than the specific ones from which the TV characters in this study were selected) was not found to be related to children's perceptions of the representativeness of the TV characters.

Identification with TV Characters. Children's identification with each of the TV characters was measured through the following question: "Would you like to be like [name of character]?" Responses were scored on a three-point scale (negative = 1; mixed = 2; positive = 3), and the individual scores for each character were summed into an index (range: 8-24) of overall identification with the eight TV characters, which was used as the dependent variable in the second analysis. In relation to this variable, the mother interview contained the following specific questions: "Do you ever have to tell [name of child] to stop imitating something or someone from television?" "Are there some things or people on television which you encourage [name of child] to imitate?" In either case, positive answers were followed by a question about the frequency of the type of behavior at issue, and responses from each pair of questions were combined on a four-point scale, as follows: "no"=0; "rarely"=1; "sometimes"=2; "often"=3.

Mother-child discussions about, and co-viewing of, the specific programs from which the eight characters were drawn were not related to children's identification with these characters. Nor was general mother-child co-viewing related to children's identification with the TV characters. Positive simple correlations with the children's identification variable were found, on the other hand, both for mothers' encouragement of children's imitation of television and for mothers' discouragement of such behavior.¹⁷ It is important to note here that these two types of maternal behavior are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, while the questions asked of mothers were general, measurement of children's identification was based upon the specific characters used in their interview. In any case, only for mothers' encouragement of imitation did the relationship remain significant in the simultaneous presence of the five controls ($r = .11$, $p < .05$).

Awareness of TV Character' Authority Relationships. The children were asked the following questions about the authority or power relationships of each of the eight TV characters: "Does [name of character] ever tell anybody on the show what to do?" "Who?" "Do you remember how [name of character] tells him/her/them to do things?" "Does anybody on the show ever tell [name of character] what to do?" "Who?" "How does he/she tell [name of character] to do things?" A point was scored for each item that a child was able to answer (maximum: 6 points), and scores were summed across all eight TV characters into an overall index of awareness of authority relationships (range of the index: 0-48). This index was used as the dependent variable in the third analysis.

General mother-child co-viewing was not found to be related to children's awareness of the TV characters' authority relationships. On the other hand, frequency of mother-child discussions about the specific programs from which the TV characters were drawn was significantly related to children's awareness of the TV characters' authority relationships ($r = .27$, $p < .001$), and this relationship persisted when the effects of the five control variables were partialled out ($r = .15$,

$p < .01$). Mother-child co-viewing of the specific programs was similarly related to children's awareness of characters' authority relationships (simple $r = .25$, $p < .001$; fifth-order partial $r = .11$, $p < .05$). There are several ways to account for associations between children's responses and mother-child co-viewing and discussions of the specific programs from which the TV characters were drawn. In this case, as Salomon has suggested, it could well be that the mere *fact* of maternal involvement in a child's TV viewing--regardless of what exactly a mother may say about a TV program--makes a child more attentive and receptive to information presented on the screen.¹⁸

Knowledge about TV Characters' Occupations. The children's knowledge about each TV character's occupation was measured through the following five questions: "Do you know what kind of job he/she has?" "What does he/she do on his/her job?" "What did he/she have to do to become a [name of job]?" "How much school did he / she have to go to to become a [name a job]?" "Did he/she have to do anything else to become a [name of job]?" A point was scored for each correct answer (maximum: 5 points), and scores for each character were summed into an overall index of occupational knowledge, which is the dependent variable in the fifth analysis. For purposes of this analysis, mothers were asked to indicate how often a TV program had given them the opportunity to give a child "information about various kinds of jobs and about adult work in general." Responses were on a four-point scale: "never"=0; "rarely"=1; "sometimes"=2; "often"=3.

No relationship was found between children's occupational knowledge and the frequency of mothers' TV -related informational commentary about jobs. Although the simple correlation between children's occupational knowledge and general mother-child co-viewing was significant ($r = .10$, $p < .05$), this relationship evaporated when the influence of the control variables was partialled out. All correlations were significant between children's occupational knowledge and mother-child discussions about and co-viewing of the programs from which the characters were drawn. The simple correlations between the dependent variable and both mother-child discussions ($r = .29$) and mother-child co-viewing ($r = .28$) of the specific programs were significant at $p < .001$, while both fifth-order partials ($r = .14$ and $r = .11$, respectively) were significant at $p < .05$. Since a good amount of the occupational knowledge on which the children were tested was unlikely to have been explicitly available in the programs themselves, it seems safe to assume that the actual content of mothers' comments to their children (either while co-viewing or after a program is over) is at least in part responsible for this portion of our findings. This also seems likely to have been true of the positive relationship between mother-child co-viewing of the specific programs and children's beliefs in the representativeness of TV characters.

Discussion

The findings outlined above have certain clear implications for future research in this area. Mothers' general co-viewing of TV with their children was in almost all cases unrelated to those aspects of the children's perceptions with which we were concerned. On the other hand, the best predictors of children's perceptions of TV characters were those aspects of mothers' behavior which were most directly concerned either with the topic of the children's perceptions of the specific programs about which the children were questioned. In the present study, the parents' questionnaire was generally broad in focus, with the result that in many cases relatively little

variance in children's perceptions was explained. However, these findings support the general notion that investigations of children's responses to TV may profit by narrowing their focus to links between *specific* aspects of TV content, children's responses and environmental factors.¹⁹ Furthermore, they confirm the need for more detailed investigations of what happens during parent-child co-viewing or post-viewing discussions of TV programs.²⁰

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¹¹ The respondents were all white and represented a wide range of social class backgrounds as measured by Hollingshead's four-factor index, based on parental education and occupation. The mean for this sample was 43.6 on the Hollingshead scale (s.d: 14.8). (See August B. Hollingshead, *Four-Factor Index of Social Status* (New Haven: Department of Sociology, Yale University, 1975).) The average age of the children was 8. 7 years (s. d.: 1.7), and there were approximately equal numbers of males and females. The average number of children per household in this sample was 2.7 (s. d.:1.1).

¹² The characters included Alice from the series of the same name; Schneider from “*One Day at a Time*”; J. J. from “*Good Times*”; Major Hoolihan and Hawkeye from “*M*A*S*H*”; Louise Jefferson, Florence, and George Jefferson from “*The Jeffersons*”.

¹³Indices used as dependent variables throughout the analysis were weighted to account for missing data when a child was unfamiliar with one or more (up to four) characters.

¹⁴“How often do you have to explain to [name of child] that some things on TV are just make-believe?” [alternatively: “are *not* make-believe?”] Responses were coded as “never”=0, “rarely”= 1, “sometimes”=2, “often”=3.

¹⁵ Partial correlations are the result of simultaneous controls for the child's age, the child's sex, the family's social class, the child's average daily TV viewing frequency, and the child's viewing frequency for the specific set of programs from which the eight TV characters were drawn (an index weighted according to the number of characters drawn from each program).

¹⁶ Simple r between mother-child discussions of specific programs and children's perceived representativeness of characters = 0.15; between mother-child co-viewing of specific programs and children's perceived representativeness = 0.19. Both are significant at $p < 0.01$.

¹⁷ Simple r between children's identification with characters and mothers' discouragement of imitation = 0.12, $p < .05$; between identification and mothers' encouragement of imitation = 0.16, $p < .001$.

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