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ABSTRACT

"Sesame Street" is a television program aimed at stimulating young viewers. This study, a part of the Early Developmental Adversity Program, attempts to discover what demographic characteristics are associated with children who view or do not view "Sesame Street." The subjects of the study were 69 3-year-old children. Black and white, as well as middle class and lower class children, were represented in the sample. The data generated by this study indicate that "Sesame Street" is watched by a disproportionately small number of black children. For every black child watching there are four or five who do not, while among whites there is an even split between watchers and nonwatchers. A predictably similar pattern of results is found when watchers and nonwatchers are compared on the basis of socioeconomic status. A significantly smaller percentage of lower class children than middle class children watch the program. Thus, viewers already belong to the group most prepared for school, while nonviewers are those who most need the possibly beneficial effects of "Sesame Street." (MH)

EARLY DEVELOPMENTAL ADVERSITY PROGRAM: PHASE III[1]

Thomas E. Jordan

EDAP Technical Note 15.1: Discriminating Characteristics of Families Watching Sesame Street.

One of the opportunities presented by programmatic research is the opportunity to gather materials with comparative ease on matters which are important. The Sesame Street enterprise, a television program aimed at stimulating young TV viewers, is directed to children within the age of the EDAP 1966 cohort (Jordan, 1969; 1970). Analysis of the viewing patterns of EDAP children and their families was added to the more persistent theme of child and family study.

In this communication an analysis is reported of the characteristics of sixty nine families whose three year olds did and did not watch Sesame Street. It is common for any educational experience to appeal to some families more than others, and TV shows are equally likely to be watched by particular audiences. In the case of Sesame Street the combination of a desirable educational experience and a TV mode of participation is equally salient. Presumably all children might profitably watch the program, but it is likely that some do and some don't. The interesting question is whether the children who might benefit from the program do in fact watch it. Conversely, the possibility exists that children from favored homes may watch it. The demographic characteristics raised for examination in this report are an attempt to see if there are particular characteristics of

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families who report their children as viewing and not viewing Sesame Street. The relevant variables are social class level and race.

METHOD

The EDAP Cohort is organized by month of birth. Watching and not watching behavior was identified in sixty nine children who belong to the December cohort. The group was about evenly split between white and black children (46% black). The median McGuire and White social class score was sixty two, representing lower middle class background.

The first demographic trait of children watching Sesame Street examined was race. Application of X^2 to the data in Table I indicates

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INSERT TABLE I ABOUT HERE

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that there is a significant disproportion in the cells representing viewing/not viewing and Negro/white ($X^2 = 8.26$, $p = .02$). The second attribute examined was social class score developed in the manner of

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INSERT TABLE II ABOUT HERE

McGuire & White (1955). Table II shows disproportionality of cell entries. A X^2 value of 11.43 was derived ($p<.01$).

DISCUSSION

The evidence drawn from this small sample ar·d presented in Table I strongly suggests that Sesame Street is watched by a disproportionately small number of black children. For every black child watching there

are four or five who do not. Among whites there is an even split between watchers and non-watchers. The correlation between the traits negro and watching is -.33 ($p = <.01$). Social class data in Table II show a similar situation, the proportion of three year old viewers is fifty percent higher among higher class whites. The black three year olds generally did not watch Sesame Street. Non-watchers were in the majority by a ratio of four to one. The correlation between SES and watching was high ($r = .46$ $p = <.01$). A final point from the data is the connection between the two sets of data. The subjects of the study were related on the population variables race and low social class. As in most populations EDAP subjects who are black are mostly lower class ($r = .70$, $p = <.01$).

It is too early to tell what the effects of watching Sesame Street will be. One possibility is that there will be none. The other possibility is that there will be an effect on the children who watch, and a benign effect. In that event there may be some results attributable to the nature of the audience. Tables I and II show that non-viewers tend to be lower class and black. Viewers tend to white and of average social class membership. An empirically valuable Sesame Street will probably lead to gains in cognitive-linguistic skills. Children who are helped by the program will move ahead in skills needed for success at school entry age. It seems from the data that viewers already belong to the group most prepared for school; conceivably an outcome to watching Sesame Street will be that they become even more prepared. Conversely, non-viewers tend to come from the segment of society least ready for school. Their status will remain the same, and viewers may move ahead in readiness. In that event, and it is only speculation, there

would be further polarity as viewers move further away in cognitive development from non-viewers. Those least needing the program will continue to watch, and those most needing the program will continue not watching. It should be noted that this line of speculation is based on stable patterns of viewing and non-viewing, and on a degree of impact which Sesame Street has not had time to demonstrate at the time of writing.

A final note to this brief communication is that data on viewing patterns are currently being gathered on many more than the sixty nine subjects of this technical note. There will shortly be data available on four to five hundred three year olds, and by Fall of 1970 data on a comparable group of EDAP children at age three and a half years of age.

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TABLE I

FREQUENCY OF BLACK AND WHITE THREE YEAR OLDS
WATCHING SESAME STREET

	Black	White
Watching	6	19
Not Watching	26	18

$X^2 = 8.26$, $p<.02$

TABLE II

FREQUENCY OF THREE YEAR OLDS WITH HIGH
AND LOW SES SCORES WATCHING SESAME STREET

	Low SES	High SES
Watching	7	19
Not Watching	29	13

$X^2 = 11.43$, $p<.01$