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ABSTRACT

The major question of this study is: Does the time context of a TV program affect children's conclusions about the action? If violent or aggressive behavior is viewed on television by children, how will they respond to the action when they know the action takes place in either the past, the present, or the future? Fifth and sixth grade boys viewed four television scenes and were tested with scaled word items tapping the dimensions of enjoyment, perceived acceptability of the action, perceived reality, and perceived violence. The author concluded that (1) action was enjoyed more in the present context, (2) the same aggressive action was felt to be less acceptable in the present context, (3) action in the present was thought to be more realistic, (4) perceived violence did not differ between contexts, and (5) no social class differences were observed on the perception dimensions. (Author/CH)

THE EFFECTS OF TIME CONTEXT ON CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF AGGRESSIVE TELEVISION CONTENT

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Abstract

THE EFFECTS OF TIME CONTEXT ON CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF AGGRESSIVE TELEVISION CONTENT

This study asked the question, does the time context of a TV program (e.g. past vs. present vs. future) affect children's perceptions of the action? Is a fist fight in a western program context perceived as less violent than the same fight in a present context? Will the aggressive behavior in a futuristic setting be more or less acceptable than that same action in a contemporary context? Which context is most enjoyed, and which is most realistic?

These questions were examined in a controlled experimental study involving 341 fifth and sixth grade boys. The boys viewed a set of four television scenes involving aggressive behavior. The time context of the scenes was systematicly varied. The youngsters perceptions of the scenes were assessed immediately after viewing each scene on a set of scaled word items tapping the dimensions of ENJOYMENT, PERCEIVED ACCEPTABILITY of the behavior, PERCEIVED REALITY, and PERCEIVED VIOLENCE. Testing was conducted in the youngster's schools in viewing groups of 6-10 students. Social class differences in perceptions were examined.

The primary findings were:

1. The same action was ENJOYED significantly more in the present context; with the past context next differing significantly from the future context.

2. The same aggressive action was seen as less ACCEPTABLE in the present context than in either the past or future contexts. Past and future contexts did not differ from each other.

3. Action in the present context was perceived to be significantly more REALISTIC than the same action in the past or future contexts. Past and future contexts differed significantly from each other, the past being more real than the future.

4. Perceived VIOLENCE did not differ between contexts.

5. No social class differences were observed on the perception dimensions.

The findings are discussed in light of methods, expected findings, and needed research.

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THE EFFECTS OF TIME CONTEXT ON CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF AGGRESSIVE TELEVISION CONTENT

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The Surgeon General's report on the effects of television violence, although inconclusive, did point out the fact that the effects question is extremely complicated (Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, 1972). To expect a general conclusion to hold true is to demonstrate ignorance of the number of variables involved in the process. The subtelty of effects negates the formulation of conclusions without specifying the conditions within which these effects are expected to appear.

This report presents the results of a study intended to examine one subtle factor involved in perceptions of television content--the time context within which the action occurs. The study asked the question, does the time context of a TV program (e.g. past vs. present vs. future) affect children's perceptions of the action? For example, is a fist fight in a western program context perceived as less violent than the same fight in a present-day context? Will the aggressive behavior in a futuristic setting be more or less acceptable than the same action in a contemporary context? Which context is most enjoyed and which is most realistic?

These questions were dealt with in a controlled experimental study involving 5th and 6th grade boys. The attempt was to determine the effect of time context on perceptions and to examine differential effects among lower-class and middle-class children.

The literature is very scant when it comes to the examination of subtle effects like the time context variable. Related work has been done in the area of fantasy vs. reality which is a form of general context (Hirsch, 1969, Feshbach, 1972). In these cases, the contextual differences did produce differential perceptions, and in the Feshbach (1972) study, differences in overt aggressive behaviors, with more aggression resulting from violence labled as "real" than from the same violence labled "fantasy".

Given the aggressive content of the scenes used in the present study, predictions were offered on the basis of evidence suggesting that the more familiar the media context, the more likely it is that the child will identify with or emulate the behaviors presented (Berkowitz, 1962). The following hypotheses were tested:

H_1: The same aggressive action in past and future contexts will be seen as less exciting and less liked than it will in a present context.

H_2: The same aggressive action in a present context will be seen as ....

(a) more real,

(b) more violent, and

(c) less acceptable

than if presented in a past or future time context.

On the basis of studies demonstrating social class differences in children's perceptions of violence (Greenberg and Gordon, 1972a; 1972b), the following predictions were tested:

H_3: Lower-class children will see all context situations as more exciting and more liked than will middle-class children.

H_4: In contrast to middle-class children, lower-class children will see no difference between context settings in terms of reality.

H_5: Lower-class children will see the conflict scenes in each context as more acceptable and less violent than will middle-class children.

METHODOLOGY

CONCEPTUAL AND OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

To deal with the manipulation of time context, the approach was to hold the action constant through the use of scenes that were neutral enough in time context cues to be labled as having come from either the past, present, or future time contexts. Given the decision to use neutral scenes and to examine social class differences, the conceptual and operational definitions of the major variables were as follows:

Independent Variables

Time context. The time period or era within which the action occurs. In this case, the major distinctions of past=western, present=contemporary, and futuristic=a time yet to come were chosen. These time contexts were operationalized in three ways: (1) telling the boys that the scene came from a (past-western, present-day, or futuristic) type of program; (2) supplying a program title that the scene was supposedly taken from (i.e. The Wild Wild West, The FBI, or Star Trek). These program titles were chosen on the basis of an earlier study which indicated that these programs were judged to be relatively equal in degree of violence (Gordon, 1969). (3) providing a short introduction to the scene using cue words related to the time ara in question. For example, in one scene the bad guy is called a "thief" in the present context, a "bandit" in the western context, and "an alien trying to steal something" in the futuristic context. See appendix 3 for full time context manipulations.

The intent, then, was to systematically vary the time context of the scenes through the general lable given the scene, the particular title given, and the cue words used to introduce the scene. The actual scenes, however, remained the same and through rotation of the context treatments each scene was viewed under each time context. It was expected that the factors used to set the time context would give the child a "predisposition" from which to view the scenes. In his regular home viewing, the child usually knows the time context of the program he is about to watch, so a similar predisposition should be functioning.

Social Class. The socioeconomic environment of the youngster. This was operationalized by coding the occupation of the child's father and/or mother. The coding scheme used was designed to take into account both income and education (Miller, 1970).

Dependent Variables

The final dependent measures were determined empirically by factor analysis (results of the factor analysis are presented with the discussion of instrumentation). The dimensions, as designed, were operationalized as scaled verbal items (see Table 1 for items used and resulting factors). The conceptual definitions of the dependent variables designed into the instrument follow:

Professed liking. The extent to which the children claim to enjoy or take pleasure in watching the scene--including action and characters.

Professed excitement. The extent to which the children claim to be emotionally stimulated or aroused by the action and/or characters in the scene.

Perceived acceptability. The extent to which the children approve of the behavior of the characters and see that behavior as normal and proper.

Perceived reality. The extent to which the action and characters of the scene present a true or representative picture of situations and events in real life.

Perceived violence. The extent to which the actions and characters of the scene engage in behavior that physically injures or intends to injure another person.

INSTRUMENTATION

The test instrument was designed to assess the five dimensions of perception defined above. Three items were constructed for each dimension for a total of 15 items. The items were randomly ordered on the final form. Although this basic instrument had evolved through two earlier studies (Greenberg and Gordon, 1972a; 1972b), the data were factor analysed to verify changes designed into this particular form of the instrument and to verify the a priori dimension structure. Table 1 presents the resulting principal axis factor analysis with verimax rotation and Kaiser normalization.

It was evident from the factor analysis that the dimensions of Liking and Excitement were loading together. Thus, later analyses combined these items into a single factor labled Enjoyment. Overall, the Enjoyment factor explained 28.5% of the total variance, with 15% for the Acceptability factor, 9% for the Reality factor, and 8% for the Violence factor. The four factors accounted for 60.5% of the total variance in judgements of the scenes. In sum, except for the combination of the Liking and Excitement dimensions, the factor analysis demonstrated that the test items held together as designed.

TABLE 1

Factor Items

Factor 1. Professed Enjoyment ..... Factor Loadings		
ITEMS:		
How much did you like the ACTION in the scene?	___VERY MUCH ___PRETTY MUCH ___NOT VERY MUCH ___NOT MUCH AT ALL	.76
How much did you like the PEOPLE in the scene?	___VERY MUCH ___PRETTY MUCH ___NOT VERY MUCH ___NOT MUCH AT ALL	.63
How much do YOU like watching scenes like this?	___VERY MUCH ___PRETTY MUCH ___NOT VERY MUCH ___NOT MUCH AT ALL	.69
How exciting was the ACTION?	___EXTREMELY EXCITING ___VERY EXCITING ___A LITTLE EXCITING ___NOT VERY EXCITING	.77
How exciting were the PEOPLE?	___EXTREMELY EXCITING ___VERY EXCITING ___A LITTLE EXCITING ___NOT VERY EXCITING	.58
How active or excited did the scene make YOU?	___EXTREMELY EXCITED ___VERY EXCITED ___A LITTLE EXCITED ___NOT VERY EXCITED	.70
	% Total Variance	28.5%

Factor 2. Perceived Acceptability ..... Factor Loadings		
How right is it for PEOPLE to act that way?	___VERY RIGHT ___PRETTY RIGHT ___NOT VERY RIGHT ___NOT RIGHT AT ALL	.67
Was it nice for the PEOPLE to act that way?	___VERY NICE ___PRETTY NICE ___NOT VERY NICE ___NOT NICE AT ALL	.75

TABLE 1

Factor Items

Factor 2. (cont.)

Were the things that happened good things to do?	___VERY GOOD ___PRETTY GOOD ___NOT VERY GOOD ___NOT GOOD AT ALL	.67
	% Total Variance	15.0%

Factor 3 Perceived Reality .....Factor Loadings

How much like real life was the ACTION?	___VERY MUCH ___PRETTY MUCH ___NOT VERY MUCH ___NOT MUCH AT ALL	.77
How much like real life were the PEOPLE?	___VERY MUCH ___PRETTY MUCH ___NOT VERY MUCH ___NOT MUCH AT ALL	.66
How much was the scene make-believe or unreal?	___VERY MUCH MAKE-BELIEVE ___PRETTY MUCH ___NOT VERY MUCH ___NOT MAKE-BELIEVE AT ALL	.44
	% Total Variance	9.0%

Factor 4. Perceived Violence .....Factor Loadings

How violent was the ACTION?	___EXTREMELY VIOLENT ___VERY VIOLENT ___A LITTLE VIOLENT ___NOT VERY VIOLENT	.56
How mean or cruel were the PEOPLE?	___EXTREMELY MEAN ___VERY MEAN ___A LITTLE MEAN ___NOT VERY MEAN	.64
How mad or angry were the PEOPLE?	___EXTREMELY ANGRY ___VERY ANGRY ___A LITTLE ANGRY ___NOT VERY ANGRY	.42
	% Total Variance	8.0%

Per cent total variance explained by the four factors: 60.5%

VIDEO MATERIALS

Scenes used for testing were selected from 25 video-taped prime-time TV programs, primarily violent in nature. The types of programs ranged from Lassie to Mannix and Hawaii Five-O. The primary difficulty in scene selection was finding scenes which were nondescript enough to be labled as having come from either a past, present, or future time context. Four scenes of 2-3 minutes in length were selected to represent the following types of action: (1)an argument, (2)a fist fight, (3)a killing, and (4)a chase. A fifth neutral scene was used as a practice scene to demonstrate procedures. The five scenes were then recorded on half-inch video tape in the order listed above, preceded by the practice scene.

SUBJECTS

The boys involved in this study were all 5th and 6th graders in the Hatboro-Horsham, Pennsylvania school district. To control out the factors of sex and race, the study was limited to white males. The social class variable was assessed through the parental occupations provided by the children. Of the 356 usable questionnaires, 136 were lower-class, 205 were middle-class, and 15 had insufficient information for coding social class. Testing was done between March 15 and April 11, 1972.

PROCEDURES

Testing was done in six elementary schools in the Hatboro-Horsham school district, Pennsylvania. The superintendent of the district designated three schools, near factorys, as being predominantly students from low-income families. Three other schools were then classed as having students from primarily middle-income families.

Each school provided a room large enough for the video-tape equipment and a 21-inch TV set. Testing was done in groups of 6-10 students. Group size was kept small to limit potential interaction among the youngsters and to provide a good view of the television set. In each case, the boys were told that we wanted their reactions to some scenes taken from programs that had been shown on television, that this was not a test and would not affect their classroom evaluation. They were asked not to put their names on the test booklet to further insure anonymity. Booklets were coded for race and version after the boys left the viewing room.

Following the introduction, they were told that we would first go through a practice run to acquaint them with the procedures. The introductory context for the practice scene was then read and the practice scene shown. Two or three items were then completed with the boys to demonstrate procedure. They then completed the remaining set and were questioned as to difficulty with words or procedures. The youngsters were then shown the

remaining four scenes with the appropriate time context manipulation, rating each scene immediately after viewing it. The entire procedure took 25-30 minutes per group. Upon completion, the boys were asked not to talk to their classmates about what they had done until everyone had participated. Teachers also refrained from discussing the project in class until testing was completed.

RESULTS

The results of the control scene comparison will be presented first, followed by the major analyses.

CONTROL SCENE COMPARISON

The first basic analysis was to determine whether perception differences existed between the student groups exposed to the three context conditions. If this was so, it could account for differences observed between context conditions and attributing differences to the time context experimental manipulation would thus be weakened. To check this, one scene was given the same context lables (present) while the other scenes were rotated through the three possible contexts (past, present, future). This rotation resulted in three independent groups (n=111, 113, 117) being exposed to the three context manipulations for three of the four scenes, while the fourth control scene remained the same context for all. Thus, testing for perception differences between the three independent groups for the control scene would determine whether the groups were different, holding manipulation constant.

For each of the dependent variables as assessed on the control scene, an analysis of variance for independent samples was computed. In all cases the results were non-significant. Thus, it was demonstrated that subject groups involved in the context manipulation were not entering the experiment with a perception bias.

PERCEPTION DIFFERENCES

The major analyses were 2 x 2 (social class x time context) repeated measures analyses of variance, since each grouping of children watched each scene and the four scenes were combined to assess overall treatment effects. Where significant main effects were evident, selected comparisons were made to pinpoint the source of the difference In all subsequent tables, the means presented represent the four scenes combined. The combined means are the best indicator of overall differences between the time context manipulations. The analyses will be presented by dependent variable.

Professed Enjoyment. Table 2A presents the means on the Enjoyment dimension for the two social class groups across the time context manipulations. It is evident from the means in Table 2A that consistent diffenences appear between the past, present, and future treatments. The analysis of variance for repeated measures (allowing for unequal n's) in Table 2B shows this time context difference to be significant ($p < .001$). However, the accompanying social class difference was not significant; nor was the interaction effect.

Given no interaction effect and no differences between social class groups, the selected comparisons between treatment pairs were done through a correlated t-test using the treatment means for the combined

social class groups. The means were: past=18.45, present=19.89, future=17.51. The results of the correlated t-tests (two tailed) were:

past vs. present: t=6.62, df=340, p<.001

past vs. future: t=3.04, df=340, p<.01

present vs. future: t=9.26, df=340, p<.001

Thus, the present context was enjoyed significantly more than the past and future contexts and the past and future contexts differed significantly from each other. On the absolute scales, the children were saying they liked the scenes "pretty much." This was a 3 on the 4-point scale, 4 being "very much."

TABLE 2

REPEATED MEASURES ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR PROCESSED ENJOYMENT BY SOCIAL CLASS AND TIME CONTEXT

A: Means[1]

		Time Context		
		Past	Present	Future
Lower Class	$\bar{X}$	18.57	19.81	17.60
	N	136	136	136
Middle Class	$\bar{X}$	18.38	19.95	17.46
	N	205	205	205

B: Variance Table

Source of Variance	df	SS	MS	F	P
Social Class	1	.90	.90	.04	ns
(Error)	339	7612.39	22.46		
Time Context	2	979.97	489.98	41.19	.001
Class x Time	2	5.35	2.68	.23	ns
(Error)	678	8064.85	11.90		

[1]Scale range: 6-24. The larger the mean, the more enjoyment.

Perceived Acceptability. Table 3A presents the means for this dependent measure. Again, the means represent the combined scenes for the two social class groups, across the three time contexts. The pattern of means for the context difference is less pronounced for the Acceptability dimension. However, as the analysis of variance in Table 3B indicates, the difference between contexts still reaches significance ($p<.05$). The social class difference does not reach significance, nor does the interaction effect. As such, the selected comparisons were made on the treatment means for the combined social class groups: past=5.55, present=5.26, future=5.46. The results of the correlated t-tests (two tailed) were:

past vs. present: $t=2.50$, $df=340$, $p<.01$

past vs. future: $t=0.68$, $df=340$, n.s.

present vs. future: $t=1.85$, $df=340$, $p<.07$

As such, aggressive behavior in the present context is less acceptable than if it occurs in either the past or future contexts, with past and future contexts not differing from each other. On the absolute scales used, the children were saying, in all contexts, that the aggressive behavior was "not very nice." This was a 2 on the 4-point scale, 4 being "very nice."

TABLE 3

REPEATED MEASURES ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR PERCEIVED ACCEPTABILITY BY SOCIAL CLASS AND TIME CONTEXT

A: Means[1]

		Time Context		
		Past	Present	Future
Lower Class	$\bar{X}$	5.63	5.36	5.38
	N	136	136	136
Middle Class	$\bar{X}$	5.50	5.20	5.52
	N	205	205	205

B: Variance Table

Source of Variance	df	SS	MS	F	P
Social Class	1	.59	.59	.07	ns
(Error)	339	2967.48	8.75		
Time Context	2	14.95	7.48	3.11	.05
Class x Time	2	4.52	2.26	.94	ns
(Error)	678	1627.36	2.40		

[1]Scale range: 3-12. The larger the mean, the more real.

Perceived Reality. The reality means appear in Table 4A. The pattern of the means indicates that the present context is seen as the most realistic. The repeated measures analysis of variance in Table 4B confirms this ($p<.001$). The social class difference and the interaction effect were not significant, so the same selected comparison procedure using correlated t-tests was applied. The treatment means for the combined social class groups were: past=8.62, present=9.37, future=8.22. The results of the correlated t-tests (two tailed) were:

past vs. present: $t=7.21$, $df=340$, $p<.001$

past vs future: $t=2.87$, $df=340$, $p<.01$

present vs. future: $t=8.79$, $df=340$, $p<.001$

Thus, the present context was seen as more real than the past and future contexts and the past and future contexts differed significantly from each other, with the past being more real than the future. On the absolute scales used, the present context was between "pretty much" and "very much", 3 and 4 on the 4-point scale. The past and future contexts were rated between "not very much" and "pretty much", 2 and 3 on the 4-point scale.

TABLE 4

REPEATED MEASURES ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR PERCEIVED REALITY BY SOCIAL CLASS AND TIME CONTEXT

A: Means[1]

		Time Context		
		Past	Present	Future
Lower Class	$\bar{X}$	8.60	9.36	8.18
	N	136	136	136
Middle Class	$\bar{X}$	8.62	9.38	8.25
	N	205	205	205

B. Variance Table

Source of Variance	df	SS	MS	F	P
Social Class	1	.35	.35	.06	ns
(Error)	339	2180.89	6.43		
Time Context	2	231.56	115.78	43.53	.001
Class x Time	2	.19	.10	.04	ns
(Error)	678	1803.25	2.66		

[1]Scale range: 3-12. The larger the mean, the more acceptable.

Perceived Violence. Table 5A presents the means for this perception dimension. No pattern of differences emerged. The repeated measures AOV in Table 5B reflects this with none of the variables reaching significance. As such, no selected comparisons were made. On the absolute scales, the youngsters were saying the scenes were "very violent." This was a 3 on the 4-point scale, four being "extremely violent."

TABLE 5

REPEATED MEASURES ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR PERCEIVED VIOLENCE BY SOCIAL CLASS AND TIME CONTEXT

A: Means[1]

		Time Context		
		Past	Present	Future
Lower Class	$\bar{X}$	9.12	8.94	9.13
	N	136	136	136
Middle Class	$\bar{X}$	9.21	9.31	9.12
	N	205	205	205

B: Variance Table

Source of Variance	df	SS	MS	F	P
Social Class	1	5.53	5.53	1.10	ns
(Error)	339	1697.14	5.01		
Time Context	2	.41	.21	.08	ns
Class x Time	2	6.28	3.14	1.18	ns
(Error)	678	1800.13	2.66		

[1]Scale range: 3-12. The larger the mean, the more violence.

SOCIAL CLASS DIFFERENCES

None of the analyses produced significance between lower and middle-class groups. This is contrary to the predictions made, based on perception studies dealing with social class (Greenberg and Gordon, 1972a, 1972b). The reason, most probably, lies in the fact that although the occupational information provided could be classified as lower or middle class, the actual environment of the students was quite homogenoeus. The six elementary schools were located in Philadelphia suburbs and although half the schools were near factorys, this suburban environment is much less hostile than the inner-city schools represented in the Greenberg and Gordon studies.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

SUMMARY

This study held action constant in a set of four television scenes involving aggressive behavior then assessed lower-class and middle-class boy's (n=341) perceptions of that action under different time contexts, i.e. past, present, and future. The findings were:

1. The same aggressive action was ENJOYED significantly more in the present context than in the past and future contexts, with the past and future contexts differing significantly from each other--the future context being least enjoyed. This confirmed hypothesis one.
2. The same aggressive behavior was seen as less ACCEPTABLE in the present context than in either the past or future contexts, with past and future contexts not differing from each other. This confirmed hypothesis 2c.
3. The same aggressive action in the present context was seen as more REALISTIC than in the past and future contexts, with the past and future contexts differing significantly from each other--the past being more real than the future. This confirmed hypothesis 2a.
4. There were no differences among the time context treatments for perceived VIOLENCE. This was contrary to the hypothesized difference (H_{2a}).
5. No social class differences were observed on the perception dimensions. This was contrary to the predicted differences (H_{3-5}).

DISCUSSION

With the exception of the Violence dimension, the perception predictions emerged as predicted. The fact that the program titles were matched on degree of violence may have been sufficient to set the youngsters predispositions to perceive violence at roughly the same level across contexts. This could also relate to the relatively weak Acceptability differences as well.

The second area where the predictions failed to conform was in the social class observations. The lack of a significant difference between class levels is contrary to earlier studies dealing with social class and perceptions of television violence (Greenberg and Gordon, 1972a; 1972b). The most likely reason for this lack of replication lies in the fact that although the schools that produced the lower class youngsters were near factories and, indeed, fit the low income classification, the overall environment was still suburban. The six elementary schools were located in Philadelphia suburbs and although half the schools were near factories, this environment is much less hostile than the inner-city schools represented in the Greenberg and Gordon studies. As such, the actual environment of the students in the present study, as apart from their income level, was quite homogeneous.

There are obvious limitations to the approach taken in this study to manipulate time context. Using the same scene is not as desirable as having scenes especially photographed in which the time cues of setting and costume are varied. The effects of such a manipulation should be to strengthen the differences found

in the present study, since the visual channel would reinforce the contextual orientation. In this instance, the context was supplied through verbal information only.

Keeping these limitations in mind, the following conclusions appear warrented:

1. The overall time context of a TV program will have a definite effect on perceptions of the action in that program.
2. The dimensions of ENJOYMENT, PERCEIVED ACCEPTABILITY of the action, and PERCEIVED REALITY will demonstrate consistent differences relative to aggressive behavior as percieved by young boys. In each case, the aggressive behavior will be enjoyed most, seen as least acceptable, and as most real in the present context.

It is highly probable that this subtle perceptual effect is influencing what the child takes from the television medium in the sense of long term effects. Further exploration is needed to determine the extent to which these effects exist between different social class groups, between males and females, and among youngsters of differing personality characteristics. A primary area of needed investigation is the extent to which value modification, i.e., attitudes toward aggressive behavior, is related to the subtle effects of time context. For example, because aggressive behavior is more acceptable in the past or future contexts, does that mean the child is more likely or less likely to imitate the behavior or absorb the reflected values? Perhaps the present context is most influential because it is the most real. Obviously, long term studies are indicated.

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