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ABSTRACT

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CHILDREN AND THE PERCEIVED REALITY OF TELEVISION

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Abstract

Based on previous research findings and original data from school children in grades 3-6, this study examines children's perceptions of reality in television as an intervening variable between exposure to the medium and the effect of TV messages. The specific focus of the current research was: (1) to isolate and identify factors which impact on a youngster's perception of the reality of TV content; and (2) to examine perceptions of content realism where the content judged varied in level of abstraction. The study examines the role of real-life experiences, interpersonal communication about television, and a set of social locators in explaining a child's perceptions of television.

Children and the Perceived Reality of Television

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The world of the young child is a brew of fact and fancy. The child moves swiftly and easily from play to instruction to dreams to chores. There is often the desire to test what appears to be real, to determine whether one's observations and senses are to be restricted to play, or are to be tried out for real with peer or parent.

The largest chunks of reality for the child emerge from early and extended interactions with parents. They define life, its attributes, its causes and its evolution. Even these referents often are checked out by the child against the assessments and pronouncements of friends.

But another large mass of information for the child is television. At 4 the child is watching 2 1/2-4 hours each day, undergoes a brief television hiatus in teen-age years, and the love affair with television is renewed in early adulthood. Any lengthy separation thereafter is a rare event.

The concentration of a young child's viewing is with the non-real content. There is little attention to news and public affairs until well up into the elementary school years (Atkin, 1974). It is the cartoons, the heroes, some few heroines, the chase, and the funny situations, which get the child's focus. By the age of 9 and 10, the vast majority of the child's program choices consist of programs originally designed and created for adult viewing.

If the child perceives program information to be realistic, to be socially useful, to be assimilated equitably with information from non-television sources, then television may blur the child's distinction between real and play. The question is more likely to be how much is misperceived, rather than if it is. We would wish to know both the basis for the child's acceptance of television stimuli as real-to-life, and the potential impact on the child's attitudes and behaviors.

Our purpose is to review what can be said about the origins and the likely effects of the perceived reality of television. In addition, our recent research on the first of these issues will permit us, in the second half of the paper, to deal more extensively from original data.

The most general sequential expectation about the likely role of the perceived reality of television for children is:

> To the extent that television content is the sole or principal source of information for a child on some particular issue or social situation, that information is more likely to be judged by the child as realistic and to be accepted.
>
> To the extent that television content is perceived to be real-to-life, the child's attitudes and behaviors elicited by exposure to that content will be correspondingly predictable.

It is critical, then, to identify and account for the impact of information inputs from other sources, particularly from direct and interpersonal experience. Furthermore, we would wish to know the attributes of the life cycle position of the child who appears to be most susceptible to perceiving television content as real, even with, or in spite of, information inputs from other sources.

Let us first demonstrate that there is a basis for expecting that a child's perceptions of television realism may have consequent impact on his behaviors. Then, we may more justifiably move to examine measurement of that phenomenon and its correlates.

In the surge of research on children and televised violence, Feshbach (1971) continued his work on aggression stimulation and inhibition. He argued that to the extent TV content is perceived as real, it may facilitate aggressive behavior. In a series of experiments manipulating perceptions of reality while holding content constant, those exposed to content labeled as real were significantly more aggressive than those exposed to content labeled as fiction.

In England, Greenberg (1974) found that perceptions of television reality among 9, 12 and 15 year-old school children were significantly related to attitude aggressiveness and to watching violent shows. In particular, believing that television content was similar to real-life, in conjunction with viewing of violent content corresponded to beliefs that violence was the most effective way to resolve interpersonal conflicts.

Perhaps it is moot to point out that dramatic television content was never intended and certainly not required to be real-to-life. We are concerned with the responses to content, regardless of what the intentions may have been.

Studies which compare attributes of the television world with normative data do document the locus of some large discrepancies. Much of the available evidence stems from the violence research. From Gerbner (1969), TV violence occurs primarily among strangers, while in real-life, it is primarily among friends and within family units; most TV violence is weapon-related, and most real violence is weapon-free; most common roles

in TV violence are assailant and victim, most common in real-life is onlooker. Dominick (1972) reported that murder, TV's most prevalent crime, is 7th on the FBI crime index. Clark and Blankenburg (1971) found that frequency of violent programming was unrelated to changing trends in real-world violence, on either a direct or delayed basis. Violence on television went with audience rating trends, not with real-life crime trends.

These discrepancies in one television content area presumably reflect parallel discrepancies in others. Specific documentation is lacking, but the importance of the kinds of discrepancies identified in violent content can be made manifest. Crime and violence experiences are primarily vicarious ones. Most Americans, particularly children, experience no violence beyond spankings, playground fights, and an occasional bumped fender. Therefore, what is seen on television about violence, and the extent to which it is perceived to be real, may have strong impacts.

Researchers' conceptions and operationalizations of the perceived reality of television (hereafter, PRTV) have been limited. Most studies have focused on television in a most general sense, rather than specific content areas. A typical measure of PRTV has been through responses to such scale items as:

"People on TV are just like people in real-life."

"The shows on TV tell about life the way it really is."

"The same things that happen to people on TV happen to people in real life."

"The places I see on TV are just like places in real life."

This is PRTV at a high level of content abstraction. One research need, implemented in the study reported here, was to segment reality perceptions for different levels of content abstraction.

With measures of PRTV very similar to that itemized, five different studies (McLeod, Atkin & Chaffee, 1971; Ward, 1971; Greenberg, 1971; Greenberg & Dominick, 1970; Dominick & Greenberg, 1970) report very similar overall findings. Children 9 and 10 years of age, are likely to be at the mid-point of such a scale of perceived reality. The average response is that they are uncertain just how real to life television is. Children who are 12 and 13 are likely to have dropped back from the mid-point somewhat, but there remains substantially a 'not sure' attitude. Interestingly enough, one study of adults places them back at the mid-point of an almost-identical scale (Dervin & Greenberg, 1973). And there is clear evidence that parents are substantially off-base in estimating their child's level of PRTV. Mothers of fourth and fifth graders were significantly below their youngster's actual perceptions (Greenberg, Vlahos & Ericson, 1971).

Not all studies have been constrained to perceptions of TV at this most general level. McLeod, Atkin & Chaffee (1970) found TV news more realistic than adventure programs among high school students; Ward (1970) found 7-year-old children far above the mid-point in terms of the believability of advertising, and 11 year-olds somewhat on the disbelief side of his continuum.

But there are substantial sub-group differences among children in their perceptions of reality. A consistent pattern of reality perceptions has been obtained for a small set of demographic and background characteristics.

Socio-Economic Status. Children from more economically-disadvantaged families have consistently indicated more belief in the true-to-life nature of television entertainment content than children from economically better-off homes. From previously referenced studies, this finding has been replicated among teen-agers in Philadelphia, elementary school children in Cleveland, and 9, 12 and 15 year-old children in London. In terms of the perceived reality of television violence in particular, Greenberg & Gordon (1971) reported that SES differentiated among both 5th and 6th grade boys, with the same directional findings. Reeves (1974) persisted with a similar difference among adult respondents. The typical explanation advanced for SES differences in PRTV judgments has been the more restricted opportunities for both alternative personal and communication experiences among the less advantaged youngsters.

Race. Within these same studies, there is a consistent race difference in PRTV. The black youngsters believe more so in the real-life nature of television fiction. This difference has persisted when SES has been controlled, although the difficulties of comparable cross-race SES comparisons make this a more tenuous finding. However, black and white adults have also shown a similar difference.

Age. From first to sixth to tenth grade, Lyle & Hoffman (1971) found decreasing belief in the reality of television. The British study found a similar decrement from 9 to 12 to 15 year olds. Again the rationale has been that the developing child, through new experiences, has more ability and information from which to question the TV content presentations.

Sex. At least two studies support the notion that girls perceive television as more realistic than boys, but these differences have not been large ones.

Overall television exposure. General use of television is strongly related to general measures of PRTV, and to some more specific measures, e.g., the frequency of watching shows which feature black actors and actresses is related to the perceived reality of those characterizations. So, in examining perceived reality, one may anticipate that youngsters who are fans or addicts of the medium will generate stronger PRTV estimates.

Results for the first three of these variables operate from an 'information deprivation' position. However, in none was an attempt made to assess the influence of what might be considered 'significant others' (Woelfel & Haller, 1971). Nor was there any direct assessment of personal experiences in either reinforcing or countermanding television inputs about reality.

Given the fragmentation of these findings, and the need for a more integrative approach, a new study was undertaken which focused on these major issues:

(1) The prior conceptions of PRTV were of the most general order, about the most general level of television content. It was hypothesized that as TV content referents become more specific in eliciting PRTV judgments, perceived reality would increase. For example, as one moved from 'people on television' to 'black people on television' to 'Mr. Dixon on Room 222,' children would be increasingly susceptible to higher reality estimates.

(2) In prior studies, the roles of other sources of information, particularly interpersonal ones, were essentially ignored. It was hypothesized that to the extent the child receives information about television characterizations from peers, parents and so on, his own attitudes would be strongly influenced.

(3) As television content referents became more specific, then the individual's personal experiences with the phenomena viewed should be of increasing importance. It was hypothesized that personal experiences, expected to be discrepant from the TV fictional emphasis, should serve to diminish PRTV in those content areas.

(4) A single study, embodying a larger set of background characteristics of the child, e.g., intelligence, as well as the additional independent variables specified above, should be more conclusive about the relative role of each of the predictor variables.

For these reasons, we now report the most recent investigation of the basis of PRTV content among young children.

Methodology

During May, 1973, data were gathered from eight elementary school classes in a suburban Michigan school district. Two classes each from the third through sixth grades were tested during regular school sessions for 20-35 minutes.

The 201 respondents, all white, included an equal number of males and females. Ages ranged from 8 to 13 years, with equal representation from the four grade levels. The study group included a wide variety of lower, middle and upper-middle-class backgrounds.

Variables

A child's perceptions of reality in television was the dependent variable. Four groups of independent variables are reported as predictors of perceived reality; 1) real-life experience with television content, 2) exposure to television, 3) the influence of significant others, or interpersonal communication influences, and 4) demographic locator variables (SES, IQ, age, and sex).

Dependent Measure - Perception of Reality. A child's perception of reality in television was operationalized at three levels of abstraction: 1) television in general, 2) television content areas, and 3) specific television characters.

Perceptions of television in general were measured with the Abstract Reality Index:

1. "People on TV are just like people in real life."
2. "The shows on TV tell about life the way it really is."
3. "The same things that happen to people on TV happen to people in real life."

Response categories were a modification of the conventional Likert responses: "I think that's true; I'm not sure; I don't think that's true." The three items intercorrelated significantly, with a scoring range of 3-9.

Perceptions of three specific television content areas were used to obtain a more specific level of abstraction.

1. "Black people on TV are just like black people in real life."
2. "Families on TV are just like families in real life."
3. "Policemen on TV are just like policemen in real life."

These content areas were used both because of the availability of well-known representative programs and because pre-tested children had demonstrated they could make judgments about such programs with little difficulty. These three items were used both separately and, given high inter-item correlations, as a summed Content Reality Index.

Finally, perceptions of reality were measured for three specific characters in each of the three content areas identified. For TV black people, we asked:

1. "Do you think Link on 'Mod Squad' is like black men in real life?"

2. "Do you think Mr. Dixon on 'Room 222' is like black men in real life?"

3. "Do you think Lamont on 'Sanford and Son' is like black men in real life?"

The questions for TV families were:

1. "Do you think the family on 'The Brady Bunch' is like families in real life?"

2. "Do you think the family on 'The Waltons' is like families in real life?"

3. "Do you think the 'Partridge Family' is like families in real life?"

The questions for TV policemen were:

1. "Do you think Reed and Malloy on 'Adam 12' are like policemen in real life?"

2. "Do you think the three policemen on 'The Rookies' are like policemen in real life?"

3. "Do you think Chief McGarrett on 'Hawaii-50' is like policemen in real life?"

Responses were, "Yes; I'm not sure; No." The nine shows were strong in 1972 audience ratings among this age group and represented the content areas of interest. Children were asked for the reality of those characters in shows they watched at least some of the time. The average number of children who watched each of the nine shows was 77% of the test group.

Independent Variables

The variables hypothesized to be predictors of PRTV were real-life experience with television content, exposure to TV, the influence of significant others, and certain demographic variables.

Real-Life Experience with Television Content. Two questions were used to measure a child's real-life experience with the three television content areas. The items for experience with black people were:

1. "How often do you see black people in real life?"

2. "How often do you get a chance to talk to black people?"

For experience with families:

3. "How often do you play with kids in their homes?"

4. "How often do you talk to other kids' mothers or fathers?"

For experience with policemen:

5. "How often have you seen real policemen?"

6. "How often have you ever talked to real policemen?"

In response, the children were to indicate "a lot", "sometimes", or "never."

The pairs of questions about black people and policemen intercorrelated significantly and were summed into indices. Only the first family item was used because the two did not correlate.

Exposure to Television. Exposure to television was measured by asking children to put a check by each of 24 shows they watched every week or almost every week. The list consisted of programs with large audiences of young children, excluding programs referred to in the reality measures. The number of shows checked ranged from 1 to 24, with a mean of 13 and a standard deviation of 5.2.

Influence of Significant Others. In operationalizing the composite influence of interpersonal sources on a child's perception of reality in television, two measures were used: 1) the approximate frequency of interaction with other people about specific TV characters and 2) the bias of these interactions about the reality of the characters.

A child could cite multiples of three different groups of people talked to about a particular character: 1) "friends," 2) "my mother or father," and/or 3) "brothers or sisters." If there was at least one source, the child was asked whether the people talked to thought the TV character was like that character's real-life counterpart. The bias measure was the child's estimate of interpersonal sources as an aggregate. Responses to the bias question were categorized "yes" (+1), "I'm not sure" (0), and "no" (-1). The number of cited sources was multipled by the bias of the exposure to create an interpersonal influence index ranging from -3 to +3.

The index represents the amount and direction of reality information a child received from interpersonal sources. High positive scores indicate that incoming information favorably compares a TV character to real-life people.

Demographic Predictors. Socio-economic status was divided into deciles using the Duncan revision of the National Opinion Research Center's standardized scale. The scale gives a percentile family SES rating of all occupations. Fathers' occupations were matched against the scale designations and the percentiles were then collapsed to ten categories. The mean SES score was 5.61, with a standard deviation of 2.63. From the original sample, 77% gave sufficient information for this measure.

The California Test of Mental Maturity was the measure of intelligence. IQ conversions from that test were used for this analysis. Scores ranged from 86 to 136 with a mean of 106 and a standard deviation of 18.2. All scores used were from tests administered during the third grade. However, only 101 scores were available because the sixth graders had never been given the test and due to student attrition. In addition, the child's sex and grade level were reported.

Results

Findings from this study will focus on these concerns: (1) Differences among levels of content abstractions for judgments of the perceived reality of television; (2) The mediating impact of personal experiences with real-life parallels of content phenomena; (3) The mediating impact of interpersonal communication experiences about the content areas; (4) Relevant background characteristics of the child; and (5) Multivariate analyses of the correlates of PRTV.

Levels of Content Abstractions

Respondents reacted to the reality of television content at three levels of abstraction -- content-free aspects, specific content areas, and specific television characters.

The overall results are strongly supportive of the conceptual hypothesis: Maximum reality is attributed to specific characters and minimum reality to the most abstract measure of television. Specific means for the three indices were 5.80 for the general reality measure, 6.71 for content reality and 7.17 for the specific characters. Given a common scale conversion which ranged from 1-9, judgments of PRTV for the general reality measure placed the respondents just above the mid-point, indicating a 'not sure' judgment, but leaning toward acceptance of television material as realistic.

Three content areas made up the specific content reality index. Perceived reality of television families averaged 5.97; of policemen, 6.89; and of black people, 7.27. Thus, the latter two content areas were generally judged as quite realistic; the former significantly less so. In a post hoc fashion, one might have anticipated this form of differentiation on the basis of the youngster's relative experiences with real-life

representatives of these content areas. Such an explanation, however, will not be supported when the variable of real-life experiences is examined more directly.

The specific television characterizations induced judgments of maximum reality. In all, nine characters were assessed, three from each of the specific content areas. This is how each was judged by viewers of the programs on which the characters appeared:

Link, of Mod Squad	6.51
The Partridge Family	6.93
Lamont, of Sanford and Son	7.08
The Brady Bunch	7.26
Mr. Dixon, of Room 222	7.35
McGarrett, of Hawaii-Five-O	7.41
The Waltons	7.50
Three policemen, of The Rookies	7.56
Reed and Malloy, of Adam 12	7.98

With the exception of Link, all character judgments were skewed toward the very realistic end of the scale assessing that judgment. And Link was significantly above the scale's midpoint. Thus, all these television characters, appearing on shows frequently watched by the subject group, were considered very true-to-life for the 3rd-6th graders studied.

A comparison of these specific character results with the content area results is informative. By averaging the three specific program representatives in each content area, one obtains this:

	Content Reality	Character Reality
Blacks	7.27	6.98
Families	5.97	7.23
Policemen	6.89	7.65

For these all-white children, their judgments of specific black characters does not differ from their judgment of black people on television in general. Whereas judgments of unnamed television families was barely on the realistic side in their assessment, judgments of three specific families, which vary greatly in their dramatic format, were far more realistic. The same was true for the perceived realism of policemen. Although policemen in general are quite realistic, there is a striking increase when the referent changes to a set of policemen who range from rookies to a police chief.

Overall, television characters for children who range from eight to twelve years of age, are very realistic people.

Personal Experiences with Television Content Areas

The posited influence of personal experiences with various families, policemen or blacks did not emerge at all. Across a range of possible comparisons for this potential influence, none were supportive of diminished PRTV scores based on personal experiences. This substantiates a null finding from an earlier set of data (Greenberg, 1972), which dealt only with TV blacks. There, an expanded measure of personal experiences -- frequency of playing with, having in classes, having in neighborhood, or having as best friends -- did not relate to PRTV of blacks.

If anything, there was counter-hypothesis support. Of nine specific characters studied, significant positive relationships were found between PRTV of three of those characters and prior personal experiences with parallel real-life phenomena. Frequent experiences with black people was significantly correlated with higher perceived reality of Link, and of Mr. Dixon; more frequent experiences with different families was significantly correlated with higher PRTV of the Waltons. For seven of the

nine specific characters, the high experience sub-groups of children generated the highest PRTV scores.

Personal experiences for this age group of children did not inhibit their PRTV; there was a distinct possibility it augmented it.

Interpersonal Communication Experiences with Television Content Areas

Interpersonal influence on PRTV was assessed for each of the nine programs watched which involved specific character perceptions. The children were asked whether they had talked with friends or immediate family about each character, and whether those others thought the character was like his/her real-life counterparts. No attempt was made to verify the validity of the child's perceptions of the beliefs of the significant others identified in this way.

So impressive are the individual replications that they warrant full tabular presentation, in Table 1. Persistently, the perceived attitudes of the children's interpersonal contacts were positively related to the children's own PRTV. This occurred for each of the nine individual television characters studied, with all nine F-ratios significant beyond the .001 level. Even more convincing are the parametric levels of judgment obtained for the different interpersonal influence types. If the child's sources said that the characters were unreal, the child's judgments of six of the characters fell well below the PRTV midpoint, ranging from 3.54 to 4.23. Only the policemen on the Rookies and on Adam 12 achieved some mild degree of realism for this sub-group.

Insert Table 1 about here

In contrast, those children who reported that their friends and family's attitudes toward these characters were realistic blew the ceiling

off the PRTV scale. All nine television character ratings exceeded 8.0 on the 9.0 scale, with the actual range from 8.16 to 8.94. The characters were as realistic for this sub-group as our measurement permitted them to be.

At one PRTV level more abstract, the results were not so conclusive. Summing across families, policemen and black people, the specific content index yielded a significant difference ($p<.05$). However, the amount of perceived reality was less. Further, the source of this difference was located primarily in the judgment of PRTV for families; for black people, the differences were trivial, and for policemen, the pattern was as predicted, but the differences did not reach significance.

Interpersonal influence plays an extremely prominent role in the child's assessment of the reality of television. It does so to some extent for content areas in general; however, its chief function is in aiding the child to define the reality of specific television roles. In doing that, it is the strongest single predictor we have isolated.

Background Characteristics of the Child

Table 2 presents the various PRTV measures for the respondent groups, subdivided by grade, sex, SES, IQ and amount of TV usage. Overall, three of the measures -- Grade, IQ and amount of TV usage -- are useful, and almost entirely with the two less abstract measures of perceived reality. The younger child, the less able child, and the TV fan place more credence in television.

Insert Table 2 about here

PRTV at the most general level yields no significant differences among these sub-groupings. The closest approximation is with amount of

television usage ($p < .07$). In a more extended analysis, correlations computed between grade and PRTV, and TV exposure and PRTV are statistically significant, but account for very little variance. There was a failure to support prior studies which yielded SES differences in perceived reality.

In terms of judgments of the specific content areas studied, grade in school, amount of television exposure, and IQ scores are strong differentiators. A separate correlational analysis indicates a minor but significant, negative relationship between SES and this measure of PRTV.

Among these differences, it is instructive to note where the departures in perceived reality occur. In age groups, the third and fourth graders are not very different, but there is a substantial dip in PRTV among fifth graders, and an even sharper one for sixth graders. Overall, this entire age range is significantly above the midpoint of this PRTV measure.

Among the IQ groups, the highest IQ group is the source of the obtained difference. Among the other two groupings, the scores are slightly reversed from expectations, but it is the significantly lower PRTV scores of the highest IQ group which isolates the relationship.

General television exposure is the third significant correlate, and the results confirm prior findings. Children checked how many of 24 different shows they regularly watched. The results for the general content measures indicate a step-wise linear relationship among the exposure groups. With the more abstract reality measure, only the largest exposure group showed a PRTV difference.

Each of the background characteristics which is a significant correlate of content area reality remains so when the dependent variable is

the reality of specific television characters. In Table 2, the column labeled "specific characters" represents the composite judgment of the nine characters assessed. Age differences are maximized between fourth and fifth grades, sex and SES measures do not differentiate, and high IQ test scorers exhibit least perceived realism. Only television exposure shows a more consistent step-wise increase in perceived reality; the avid viewers perceive the most realism in the fiction they watch.

Multivariate Analyses

Our final approach was to use multiple regression techniques to identify the key correlates of the several PRT" measures. Table 3 summarizes the findings.

Insert Table 3 about here

For the general reality and the content reality indices, the multiple correlations, although significant, are not very substartial, each accounting for approximately 10% of the total variance in the dependent measures.

For the specific television characters, the multiple correlations are much larger, averaging .60, and accounting for more than one-third of the total variance in those dependent measures.

Three of the predictor variables show a persistent pattern of influence -- interpersonal information about television reality, the age of the youngster as reflected by grade in school, and sheer frequency of exposure to television. The importance of age is restricted to the two more abstract levels of reality; it is not a factor in the child's judgments of specific television characters.

Discussion

The new study data in this paper have contributed two primary inputs to the growing discourse on the reality-fantasy aspects of children and television. For one, the critical import of the level of content specificity children are asked about has been isolated. To the extent the child is asked more and more specifically about television content, perceptions of the reality of the content phenomena are more pervasive. Concern had been expressed about the child who found much reality in television entertainment in general; concern should be intensified by this more focused identification of where the greater perceptions of reality exist. The people, the actors, the heroines are very alive and realistic to the child viewer.

For a second, the principal mediator of the perceptions of character and content reality clearly is interpersonal sources of information. The child perceives that the inputs received from significant others correspond to his own. Some may suggest this is projection, given the measurement process involved. However, current research at Ohio State and elsewhere is demonstrating that actually interviewing significant others yields correlations with the respondent's perceptions which match or exceed the relationship levels found here. The correlation between the child's own attitude and his perceptions of what others have told him is likely to be at least as large as the correlation between the child's attitudes and what others indicate they did tell him. This results, among young people at least, in mutual reinforcement as to the high level of reality to be found in the shows watched.

One significant question which remains open is just what in the content presentations triggers reality perceptions. We know little for

example, about the character attributes which might be eliciting reality responses. Is it the way people talk, look, or otherwise behave. Surely, some characters are more realistically perceived -- the policemen in this study -- than others. Precisely why this is so is unknown. Gordon (1973) has shown that time context can affect reality perceptions. Westerns or futuristic settings do not yield as strong a set of reality perceptions as contemporary stagings. This 'historical' variable is confounded with the way people dress and the way they do things. This study has demonstrated the need to go to the character level for reality perceptions; it suggests the need to determine whether a further levels search will be meaningful.

Most paradoxical is the continuing inability of the role of personal experiences with content phenomena to make any sort of difference in the children's perceptions. In the prior paragraph, we were tempted to suggest that personal familiarity with the objects, people or settings would intervene in judging the veracity of the content. But only the time setting is a defensible proposition from existing data. If familiarity is similar to what we did ask, how often the children had interacted with others, by seeing, talking, and playing with them, personal experiences just did not affect the perceived reality judgments.

There are limits to our measure of prior experiences which may explain the lack of findings. A larger domain of experiences, or more precise ones, may need tapping. At this point, having more faith in our measure than our conception of how real-life experience may interact, there are some alternative considerations. For one, the reality judgments may flow from the mediated versions of life to real-life experiences in some cases. If policemen are first learned about on television,

and then experienced in real-life, the judgment of the fictional may supercede as well as precede estimates of the true objects. This could equally be the case for inter-racial perceptions or any of a large set of things first or largely contacted through a TV version. The standard of judgment used may well be the fictional presentation, against which the true-to-life one is being weighed.

A second consideration must be with the anticipated nature of the relationship between real-life contacts and TV contacts. Earlier we had argued that real-life experiences would generally contradict the fictional presentations, and thus impede acceptance of the latter. If a principal motivation for television-watching is social learning--learning about how to get along with others, how to act, how to handle problems--then objective discrepancies may be less important than the perceived social utility of the information received. To this point, there is no evidence to indicate that real-life experiences inhibit perceptions of TV reality. Thus, one may argue and begin to test the notion that such experiences may facilitate reality perceptions, at least for fictional content that is contemporary in nature, and where the time order of real vs. mediated experiences may be reversible.

Testing these alternatives requires some control over which experiences occur first, those on TV or those for real. There are also experiences which occur only on TV, and those for which there is little, if any, fictional counterpart. A closer scrutiny as to what the child is using as a baseline of judgment is warranted as well.

We have not accounted for a very satisfactory amount of variance in PRTV. The small sub-set of significant predictors estimates little more than one-third of the variance in the reality judgments made. Other

contributors must be identified. What else about the child is important to assay in understanding his reality perceptions. Such measures are more apt to originate with social and psychological characteristics than with demographic ones, it appears. We shall await arguments from personality theorists and others to suggest the critical determinants, but will independently pursue such notions as the child's peer group relations, family conflict patterns, related media content usage emphases, and so on.

The principal reason for understanding the concept of perceived reality of television should not be lost in this discourse. Perceived reality is of social and scientific interest only if it is heuristic in explaining consequent behaviors. Do children with more engrossing perceptions of TV reality think, act, and talk differently. Is this difference with regard to real-life issues and problems, rather than television ones? If the difference is confined to the child's interpretation of TV content, it is a more trivial issue. That is, if the child's perception of television reality affects only his TV exposure patterns, his liking for some characters more than others, and his attitudes toward content themes and story lines, the conception is less important than if it is his relationships to non-television phenomena which are affected. These data do not speak to that issue. It is not premature to understand the origins of these attitudes in the child, but it is presumptuous to assign it much import until research can demonstrate its implications.

These have been only sparse research indications of the impact of perceived reality, especially Feshbach's work. Extensions to possible impact areas are numerous:

How do the child's expectations about non-experienced real-life events coincide with the media versions?

What values are learned from TV content which is perceived to be realistic?

What is the objective discrepancy between real-life occurrences and media occurrences in such little analyzed areas as sex roles, parent roles, teen-age roles?

Do degree and kind of imitation or modeling derive from perceptions of TV realities?

How do content reality perceptions test out in real-life contexts?

Do TV reality judgments influence social intercourse, both in terms of what is talked about, with whom, and in what fashion?

Is news information -- generally ignored by young children -- compared against fictional presentations and found wanting by the high TV realism group?

These sample the kinds of extensions which encourage us. They certainly do not exhaust the most salient possibilities.

Underscoring this approach is the emphasis on the child's perceptions of what is real. Typical media analysts assign to themselves the normative role of content arbiter. They call some content real and other fantasy. Typically, only that dichotomy is used. Or just those two extreme experimental conditions are created. The present schema suggests a multi-dimensional continuum of content perceptions for the observer, and a flexible one at that. It is a continuum whose dimensions may be examined in terms of the specificity of content being assessed, and whose flexibility may be represented by the child's cognitive and affective developmental stages. One value in categorizing content from the standpoint of the observer may be in its ability to explain otherwise contradictory research findings. Let us suggest one example.

The research on televised violence assigns entertainment programming to the fantasy realm. Entertainment programs were compared with news programs by Feshbach to make a presumably clean distinction between reality and fantasy. Yet, there is considerable variance in the degree of judged reality of particular programs. The explanatory factor, uncontrolled in such studies, may be the degree of realism in the so-called fantasy content perceived by the child. For a child who perceives a program heaped with violence to be realistic, regardless if that program is a cartoon, western, super-cop, or news, the most prominent aggression theories could then predict even more aggressive behavior. A second child whose judgment of that same show falls to the considerably unrealistic side is not expected to be as imitative, or as aggressive. We are not suggesting content-free distinctions. Surely, the show which has an abundance of hitting, shooting, or shouting is more likely to elicit aggressive responses. But accuracy in predicting such responses may be abetted by knowledge of just how realistic that particular show is to a particular viewer. Fantasy and reality in content may require new conceptualizing. Too much evidence suggests they are not extremities on a single dimension, but that each varies greatly, and perhaps along several dimensions.

Having looked so hard at a single concept, it is tempting to suggest that this is the most singular variable for study of potential mass communication effects. To be more realistic, (and with no more puns), the maximum utility of perceived reality is likely to be as a mediating contributor in concert with other variables. First, exposure is essential for any mass communication impact, and the variables which account for different exposure patterns must be integrated in any wholistic predictive

paradigm. Second, one must determine the child's needs, vis a vis television. This suggests that the child seeks certain gratifications from the set and his motivations play a critical role in interacting with or precipitating reality perceptions. Third, real-life experiences do contribute to the child's cognitive and affective development, but their role in melding with TV experiences has not yet been demonstrated or correctly predicted. Logically, they remain a part of any explanatory set of media impacts. Fourth, the interpersonal mediated experiences of the child, in terms of what companions, parents and others tell him/her about places, events, and people can orient responses to media stimuli. Finally, the nature of what is available to be observed, its values, its consistencies, its enticements, and its absurdities must be incorporated. In this nexus, the child's perceptions of what is real and what is less real play a role in development and in socialization.

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Table 1

Reality Estimates by Interpersonal Influence

	Interpersonal Influence				
	Not Real	Neutral	Real	df	F
Reality Measures					
General TV Content Areas					
Black People	7.23	7.08	7.59	2/117	.43
Families	5.46	6.06	6.99	2/166	5.97*
Policemen	6.87	6.99	7.56	2/145	1.69
Content Index	6.60	6.70	7.28	2/182	3.07*
Specific Black People					
Link	3.42	7.26	8.16	2/57	19.9**
Mr. Dixon	4.08	6.84	8.52	2/72	21.4**
Lamont	5.25	7.20	8.49	2/85	11.8**
Specific Families					
Brady Bunch	3.63	7.65	8.58	2/121	77.1**
The Waltons	3.54	7.38	8.43	2/141	39.8**
Partridges	4.26	7.08	8.43	2/111	33.7**
Specific Policemen					
Reed, Malloy	5.70	7.50	8.94	2/113	25.7**
The Rookies	6.00	7.23	8.88	2/55	9.19**
McGarrett	3.09	7.05	8.73	2/110	36.4**

Higher scores indicate greater perceived reality

* p<.05
** p<.001

Table 2

Levels of Reality by Child's Characteristics

			Reality		
			General	Content Areas	Specific Characters
Grade		3rd	5.08	7.14	7.50
		4th	5.02	7.02	7.63
		5th	4.98	6.66	7.20
		6th	4.95	6.02	6.91
	F		.09	4.45**	2.63*
Sex		Male	5.95	6.73	7.20
		Female	5.63	6.67	7.42
	t		1.39	.24	1.17
SES		Low	5.08	6.73	6.77
		Lower-Middle	5.00	7.02	7.34
		Upper-Middle	4.94	6.41	7.33
		High	4.66	6.36	7.16
	F		.70	1.30	1.25
IQ		Low	5.31	7.25	7.56
		Inter.	5.24	7.43	7.73
		High	4.81	6.53	7.06
	F		1.38	3.76*	2.88[a]
TV Exposure		Low	5.53	6.27	6.88
		Medium	5.61	6.69	7.23
		High	6.16	7.11	7.75
	F		2.58	3.97*	6.57**

Higher scores indicate greater perceived reality

* p<.05
** p<.01
[a] p=.06

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis of PRTV

Multiple Correlation

	All Variables	Least Square Addition	Significant Co-Variates (Betas)
General Reality	.32	.29	IP* Influence, TV Exposure
Content Reality	.36	.32	Grade, IP Influence
Blacks	.29	.27	Grade
Families	.42	.41	Grade, TV Exposure, IP Influence, Real-Life Experiences
Policemen	.25	.19	Grade, IQ
Link	.66	.59	IP Influence
Mr. Dixon	.54	.49	IP Influence
Lamont	.62	.59	IP Influence
Waltons	.59	.58	IP Influence, TV Exposure
Partridges	.64	.62	IP Influence, TV Exposure
Bradys	.68	.68	IP Influence
McGarrett	.63	.62	IP Influence
Reed and Malloy	.61	.57	IP Influence, TV Exposure
Rookies	.58	.50	IP Influence, Real-Life Experiences

* Interpersonal Influence

Biographical Sketch

Bradley S. Greenberg is Professor of Communication at Michigan State University. After receiving his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin, Dr. Greenberg served on the staff of the Institute of Communication Research at Stanford University. His major research has examined the mass communication behaviors of the urban poor, and of children, and the socialization effects of the media.

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