

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 098 632

CS 500 873

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TITLE Analyzing Prosocial Content on T.V.
PUB DATE Sep 74
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (82nd, New Orleans, Louisiana, Aug. 30-Sept. 3, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.75 HC-\$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Patterns; Commercial Television; *Content Analysis; Drama; Mass Media; *Social Attitudes; Social Behavior; *Television Research; Television Viewing

ABSTRACT

To enhance knowledge of television content, a prosocial code was developed by watching a large number of potentially prosocial television programs and making notes on all the positive acts. The behaviors were classified into a workable number of categories. The prosocial code is largely verbal and contains seven categories which fall into two major groups, interpersonal and self-control. The level of prosocial content on network drama programs is low. Many of the instances which clearly fit the definitions in the code are very low-keyed and probably have little impact, in contrast to most of the aggressive and neutral programs, which constitute the largest part of commercial television drama. Prosocial behaviors are incidental to the main plot. Only on the relatively rare prosocial programs are prosocial behaviors a central theme and thus likely to have a significant effect on viewers.
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ED 098632

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ANALYZING PROSOCIAL CONTENT ON T.V.

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For many years social scientists and others have been observing the amount of aggression on commercial television. In the last several years, George Gerbner at the Annenberg School of Communications has been very systematically counting aggressive instances and has provided an on-going assessment of violence on television. However, little attention has been paid to positive behavior on television. The pro-social code I'm describing today is an attempt to fill that gap in our knowledge of television content.

The first step in development of the code was simply to watch a large number of potentially pro-social television programs and make notes on all the positive acts. After having observed a number of different types of programs, we began to classify the behaviors into a workable number of categories. In addition, we added several categories for which well-established research paradigms exist, notably delay of gratification/task persistence, resistance to temptation, and sharing. The result was a total of eleven categories (the categories will be described more fully in a moment). As this very tentative code was used, we collapsed three categories, sharing, helping, and cooperation, into one--altruism. A fourth, friendliness and display of affection was dropped all together, in large part because virtually every act on television which is not overtly anti-social can be coded in this way.

At this point we realized that our code could not be comprehensive--some obviously positive acts occur which do not fit our existing code, yet do not occur often enough to warrant separate categories--the occasional program about ecology is one example, many of the Oriental philosophy parts of Kung Fu are another. In spite of these deficiencies, I think that most of the positive behaviors on commercial television do get counted. Thus, our code is considerably broader in scope than current aggression

codes, which include only physical aggression, but do not include other anti-social, but non-violent behaviors, such as blackmail, cheating, burglary, etc.

In part because this code is more comprehensive than aggression codes, we find that it must be more complex. Many behaviors could be coded in one of several ways, and the code must include instructions which will handle these problems. An additional difference between pro-social acts and aggression, however, concerns the nature of the acts themselves. Aggression is usually action-oriented and quite unmistakable--the observer rarely has to determine if injury is intended or not. Aggression is rarely verbal, and when it is, it is usually quite explicit--"If you don't have the money in two hours, I'm going to kill you."

Pro-social behavior, on the other hand, is largely verbal, and the coder must consider the intent of the speaker. For example, on the Mary Tyler Moore Show, Mary informs Murray, a co-worker, of the latest crisis in her life. Murray says, "That's too bad"--without looking up from his work. This probably would not be coded as sympathy, but if Murray had looked up and said the same thing in a different tone of voice it would have been coded. The differences between the two acts are subtle, and difficult to define, other than by example.

Because of the subtlety and complexity of coding pro-social behavior, training raters is an extensive process. After studying the coding manual, which gives detailed descriptions of each category, and examples, the coder views and codes a special 1/2 hour program consisting of 12 two-minute segments drawn from a variety of commercial programs. These segments have been selected so that examples of every category appear, including examples of difficult discriminations. This special tape is followed by coding

of six 1/2 hour programs.

Initial testing of the code on a small sample of programs indicates a satisfactory overall correlation between two coders of .97. Individual categories correlate less well--very low frequency categories such as resistance to temptation are not at all reliable, while altruism at .91 and control of aggression at .94 are almost at the level of the overall code.

The pro-social code now contains seven categories. The pro-social categories appear to fall into two major groups, interpersonal and self-control. The interpersonal group includes four categories: altruism, sympathy, explaining feelings of self or others, and reparation for bad behavior. The self-control group includes delay of gratification/task persistence, control of aggression, and resistance to temptation.

Altruism is defined as sharing, helping, and cooperation involving humans or animals. We had originally separated altruism into three categories, but found that they overlapped considerably, and so collapsed them. This category thus includes the gift or loan of one's own possessions, and a wide variety of helping behaviors, such as some kind of physical assistance, and especially giving specific advice. It does not include role behaviors, i.e., behaviors that are accomplished in the normal conduct of an occupational or social role. Thus, a doctor working in a hospital, taking care of patients, is not seen as altruistic. However, if he goes beyond his role demands, his behavior is coded--doing volunteer work in a free clinic, stopping at the scene of an accident, going to a patient's house to provide service. Because of this restriction, some of the professional shows, programs about lawyers, doctors, and teachers, are sometimes low in altruism. In many of them, however, the lead characters

do go beyond their roles quite frequently; Marcus Welby is an obvious example.

Sympathy, the second interpersonal category, is defined as "a verbal or behavioral expression of concern for others and their problems." This category is one of the most frequently coded, on all types of programs. It can include expressing concern directly to the person himself, or talking about that person with others. Medical programs which have coded low on altruism because the helping is role behavior will sometimes code highly in this category; the doctor becomes emotionally involved with the patient. Sympathy often accompanies other pro-social behaviors such as altruism; in those cases, only the altruism is coded.

The third category is explaining feelings of self or others, defined as "statements to another person explaining the feelings, thinking, or action of self or others with the intent of effecting positive outcome..." In one episode of Room 222, for example, a very bright 12-year-old boy is placed in senior high school. He tries to take part in every activity, both social and athletic, but he's too young to be successful at very many of these activities. Finally, he explains to his teacher that he is trying to prove himself with his fellow students. In some children's programs, like Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids and Misterogers' Neighborhood, a narrator will speak directly to the audience about why people behave as they do; in most cases, these statements are also coded as explaining feelings.

The last interpersonal category is reparation for bad behavior. This category includes attempts to repair physical damage of some kind, admission of a mistake and/or apology, or attempts to insure that the wrong-doing will be eliminated or reduced (for example, an alcoholic going to AA). Characters on crime dramas are rarely repentent; when someone on a crime drama is coded for reparation for bad behavior, it is usually a good guy, apologizing for

a mistake, or for insults or insensitivity. On medical shows, reparation is usually by the guest star, at the end of the program. Most of these episodes focus on the stubbornness of the guest star, who wants to do something contrary to the doctor's wishes; at the end of the show, he realizes that the doctor was right all along, and says so.

The first self-control category is delay of gratification/task persistence. Delay of gratification is defined as "postponing or foregoing completely a less-valued product, reward, or situation in order to achieve a potential more-valued product, reward, or situation." This category was included because of the well-defined research paradigm in the psychological literature; we had hoped to be able to identify programs most likely to increase delay of gratification as measured by this paradigm. Perhaps we could do this, if these behaviors occurred, but unfortunately they do not. Rather, the behaviors coded in this category are more likely to be task persistence, defined as "action or statements pertaining to spending additional time or effort on a task so that a goal may be reached or a product made better." In fact, task persistence is also rarely coded: Horatio Alger is not the standard TV hero.

Control of aggression, the second self-control category, is defined as "non-aggressive acts or statements which serve to eliminate or prevent aggression by self or others toward humans or animals." This category includes alternatives to aggression, as well as attempts to stop threatened aggression. Although it is theoretically possible for a program to code high on control of aggression and low on aggression, most programs which contain control of aggression are also high in aggression. A typical instance of control of aggression would involve one character threatening

aggression, and a second character persuading the first not to aggress. In this case, the threat would be coded as one instance of aggression, and the persuasion as one instance of control of aggression. This category is also rarely coded; a series which is consistently pro-social may occasionally have an episode which deals explicitly with how to handle aggression. The category is otherwise largely unused.

The final category in the self-control group is resistance to temptation, defined as "withstanding the temptation to engage in behaviors generally prohibited by society, which may be prohibited in the film explicitly or implicitly." It also includes statements that a particular behavior is wrong, or an attempt by another person to prevent the commission of a prohibited act. Most instances of resistance to temptation are of the latter type: one character tries to stop another character from doing something, which the second character then does anyway. Although illegal acts are clearly within the class of prohibited behaviors, most coded instances of resistance to temptation refer to behaviors which are immoral, or, at the least, not very nice, but not illegal, for example, cheating or playing nasty practical jokes.

Since the pro-social code was developed, we have also begun to code aggression, defined as "the use of force, threat of force, or intent of force against another person or animal, with the intent or willingness to injure." It includes hitting, shooting, knifing, poisoning, and similar kinds of actions. Correlations between two coders is quite high, at .97.

The code seems to be adequate for classifying programs as neutral, aggressive, or pro-social. Over the course of this last summer, I had the opportunity to have coders work on a large number of programs, as part of a larger project being run by Dr. Robert Liebert and Dr. Rita

Poulos, of the Media Action Research Center. The goal was to produce a large number of hours of programming which could be clearly classified as highly pro-social, containing of 14 or more pro-social acts, and fewer than 2 aggressive acts, highly aggressive, containing 6 or more aggressive acts, and fewer than 14 pro-social acts, or neutral, containing fewer than 2 aggressive or 14 pro-social acts. We also had to develop a fourth group of programs, unclassified, consisting of programs which were too high in both pro-social and aggressive to be clearly placed in any category.

Because we had particular goals in mind, our selection of programs was not random; however, I believe that it is representative. We attempted to get a wide variety of programs, and did not systematically eliminate any type of program at the beginning of the project. Later, as the nature of the programs became clear, we were more selective. Several series, for example, Bonanza and Kung Fu, consistently fell into the unclassified group; after three or four episodes were coded, no further efforts were made to obtain these programs. As we began to reach our goal on aggressive programs, we became selective in our choice of programs, trying to get episodes from series we had not yet used. I think that the statements I'm making about program types are fairly accurate, although certainly they should be confirmed by coding a random selection of programs, or all the drama programs in one week, as Gerbner does.

The aggressive category, as we expected, was the easiest to fill. We had hoped to obtain a variety of types of programs and had little difficulty in balancing hour versus half-hour programs, children's versus adult programs. Almost all the cartoons we coded fell into this classification-- and most have very little pro-social behavior of any kind. In adult

programming, also as we might expect, most of the Westerns, private detective shows, and police shows fell into this category. There is somewhat more pro-social behavior in these programs (still low because of the way we defined "aggressive programming") consisting largely of sympathy and concern for others, in this case, the others usually being the victims of aggression. In spite of the very high level of aggression, control of aggression is very rare--there is rarely any attempt to stop aggression, or any indication that it is wrong. In fact, all of the self-control categories are rarely coded in these programs.

It was also quite easy to find all the neutral programs we needed, but considerably more difficult to balance them for types of programs. Almost all the situation comedies are represented here, as well as the contemporary comedies (All in the Family, Sanford and Son, Maude, etc.) but virtually no other types of programs. Occasionally, a usually pro-social hour program will fall into this category, for example, The Waltons or one of the medical programs. Again, of the pro-social behaviors which do occur, sympathy and altruism are most common.

Our other major category, of course, was pro-social programs--and we ran into serious difficulty. At one point, toward the end of the summer, we had over 60 hours of aggressive programs, about 50 of neutral, and less than 25 of pro-social. Of those programs, most are 1/2 hour situation comedies; there are relatively few hour pro-social programs--the major one, of course, being The Waltons, which provided some variety to the pro-social group. We had expected the medical programs also to be quite high in pro-social behavior, but they are less consistent. A large number of the episodes we coded dealt with reorganizing the hospital or some kind of intra-staff conflict, or had some aggression.

All of the interpersonal behaviors occur frequently in pro-social programs, especially the serious or semi-serious programs. Explaining feelings, for example, codes very high on The Waltons, and Room 222.

The self-control categories are more highly represented here than anywhere else, but still less than interpersonal behaviors. When these behaviors do occur, they are usually the theme of the entire program. Control of aggression, as I noted before, is a very low frequency behavior, Kung Fu is the program which I expected to be high in this category, but the nature of the program has changed. Originally Caine, the star, would attempt to solve difficult situations using non-violent means, and would talk a lot about the evils of aggression. Of course, this never worked and in the end he had to beat people anyway, but there was a lot of control of aggression during the first part of the show. The episodes I have seen in the last several months don't even contain these unsuccessful attempts at control of aggression. Resistance to temptation also is an infrequent behavior on television; temptation is given into as rapidly as possible. The rest of the program then focuses on the difficulties the character gets into. This format has one advantage as far as coding is concerned--it increases the reparation for bad behavior.

The final group, those that could not be classified into any of the three major categories, are in some ways the most interesting. Into this category fell the essentially neutral situation comedies with a few aggressive incidents. These aggressive instances were rarely major events, and almost never relevant to the plot. An even larger number of programs in this category are action-adventures and Westerns. The usual situation is that the star of the show is either already personally involved or becomes personally involved with someone in trouble, either as victim or

or falsely accused criminal. The star is very sympathetic to the victim and begins a series of acts which I call "aggressive helping"--he attempts to help the victim by finding the criminal, a process involving a great deal of aggression. In these programs, crime and violence are talked about, and the search for criminals is central to the plot. Kung Fu and Bonanza are consistently in this category.

A third type of program is the serious program which is essentially pro-social, non-crime related, but has a series of highly dramatic aggressive incidents at the end, often not necessary to the plot. In a M.A.S.H. episode, for example, Radar, a regular character on the show, accidentally hits a Korean with a jeep. The doctors are very helpful to Radar, and give special attention to the Korean. So far, the program is very pro-social. However, a sub-plot concerns a young soldier with battle fatigue, who refuses to return to the front. At the end of the show, he breaks down completely, gets hold of a gun, and shoots the place up. Another example is from Bonanza: the Cartrights help four old ladies who have moved to the West settle into their new home. Their final actions, however, are aggressive helping--they (and the old ladies) have a gun battle with bad guys who want the old ladies' land. In both of these shows, the scripts could have been redone so that the aggression was not necessary, without changing the basic nature of the program.

In sum, the level of pro-social content on network drama programs is low. Many of the instances which clearly fit the definitions in the code are very low-keyed, and probably have little impact, in contrast to most of the aggressive and neutral programs, which constitute the largest part of commercial television drama, pro-social behaviors are incidental to the main plot. Only on the relatively rare pro-social programs are pro-social behaviors a central theme, and thus likely to have a significant effect on viewers.