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AUTHOR Rosenblatt, Paul C.; Cunningham, Michael R.  
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AVAILABLE FROM Paul C. Rosenblatt, Department of Family Social  
Science, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota  
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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the amount of television watching and level of family tension was studied through interviews carried out in 64 Minneapolis households. Tension levels were found to be higher in families with high levels of television watching, particularly in households with a high population density. There appears to be a strong relationship between television watching and the number of conflicts, arguments, disagreements, or complaints over television in households with low population density. Television set operation may be used to prevent tense interactions, particularly in households that are so crowded that people cannot easily use spatial separation to control tense interaction. (SK)

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Television Watching and Family Tension<sup>1</sup>  
Paul C. Rosenblatt<sup>2</sup> and Michael R. Cunningham  
University of Minnesota

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Abstract

The relationship between amount of television watching and level of family tension was studied through interviews carried out in 64 Minneapolis households. Tension levels were found to be higher in families with high levels of television watching, particularly in households with a high population density. Some of the effect may be due to frustrations stemming from the operation of television sets. But an additional finding, that there is a stronger relationship between television watching and the number of conflicts, arguments, disagreements, or complaints over television in households with low population density, suggests even more strongly that television set operation is used to prevent tense interaction, particularly in households that are so crowded that people cannot easily use spatial separation to control tense interaction.

## Television Watching and Family Tension

The affect of television on children has received a great deal of attention from psychologists, and few areas of behavioral science research have received as much recent attention from policy makers and the general public (Television and Social Behavior, 1972). In recent years the average American family has had a television set on roughly six to seven hours of the day (Broadcasting Yearbook, 1971; U. S. Office of Management and Budget, 1973, p. 221). It is striking that the concern about television has been so narrowly focussed on the effects of television on children. An area of as great importance seems to have been neglected: the effect of television on family relations. The operation of a television set could be associated with troubled family relations in two general ways.

First, television set operation could produce frustration and consequent tension. Television watching could be a source of problems because of the frustrations stemming from noise, distraction, and discrepant preferences for programs or sound volume. The operation of the television set could make it more difficult to carry on other activities in the vicinity of the set--e.g., chatting, reading, doing homework, talking on the phone, sleeping, writing letters, carrying on solitary reflection. Family members could quarrel over what is watched or whether the television set should be on. In families with tight living quarters, the effect of the operation of the television set on other activities could be especially great because of the absence of alternative rooms for carrying on activities that the operation of a television set disrupts. In general, when families are thrown together in tight places

the opportunities for one person's behavior to produce frustration and consequent tension in others is greater (Rosenblatt & Russell, 1975). Hence, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that, other things being equal, the more time a television set is on in a dwelling the more tension in family relationships there may be, and to hypothesize that the relationship would be especially strong in households with a high population density.

A second way in which the operation of a television set could be associated with family problems is that operation of the television set could be used by family members to avoid tense interaction and the expression of anger and aggression. In many families, television watching reduces talking (Robinson, 1972; Walters & Stone, 1971). Keeping potential combatants apart seems a common human way of dealing with tensions in close social relations (Cozby & Rosenblatt, 1971; Rosenblatt, Jackson, & Walsh, 1972). In families where there is a great deal of interpersonal tension, with people who are prone to frequent temper outbursts, who are often moody, who are too critical or faultfinding, or who are often unhappy, there is probably often the potential for any conversation to produce hurt and anger. People may enter casual conversations on edge, not sure whether they can avoid instigating others to anger and not sure whether they can avoid being insulted, criticized, yelled at, or otherwise abraded. In such families, even when no unpleasant words are exchanged in a conversation, people may be quite anxious while a conversation is going on. In families with such tension, avoidance of interaction might be desirable and common, and television watching might be one of the more available and serviceable means of accomplishing the avoidance.

Television watching might be an especially useful device for dealing with tensions between spouses, since American marriage norms seem to value togetherness in a way that makes it difficult for spouses to maintain places in their residence in which they can be apart from each other (Rosenblatt & Budd, in press). Joint television watching can provide to the couple the appearance of togetherness, and as long as one or more of the combatants is watching and listening to the television set, there is less opportunity for the highest levels of tense interaction. Thus, from considerations of the control of tense interaction, as from considerations of frustration, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that high levels of television watching will co-occur with high levels of family tension. It also seems reasonable to hypothesize from considerations of tension control, as from considerations of frustration, that the relationship between television watching and family tension would be stronger in homes with a high population density. Where there is a high population density, conflict avoidance through spatial separation within the dwelling seems relatively impossible.

Although considerations of frustration and considerations of conflict avoidance both yield similar predictions about the relationship of television watching to family tension and about the interactive effect of household population density, the two bases of theorizing yield competing predictions concerning complaints over operation of the television set. If frustration is responsible for a positive correlation between television watching and family tension, then there should be a stronger correlation between the amount of time the television set is on and conflicts, arguments, disagreements, or complaints over operation of the television set

where people are less able to escape the frustration, that is, in households with high population density. However, if conflict avoidance underlies a positive correlation between television watching and family tension we would expect a comparatively weak correlation between television watching and the number of conflicts, arguments, disagreements or complaints over television set operation in households with a high population density, because of the value of television set operation in conflict avoidance.

There are many other conceivable ways in which the operation of a television set could be associated with family problems. For example, operation of the set could be used as a background noise to blot out noxious noises (including quarrels) from other family members. The content of specific programs could reduce family tensions by showing family members ways to deal with problems, by allowing tension catharsis, or by providing a frame of reference that makes the problems of the family members seem insignificant. Alternatively, the content of specific programs could enhance tensions by making the problems of family members seem even more significant and the lack of resolution of the tensions seem more frustrating (in contrast to the speedy resolution of problems typical of television programs). Or the events depicted on television (e.g., the loss suffered by a favorite sports team, a news report that makes it clear that times will be more difficult) could irritate family members in a way that augments family tensions. However, these and other conceivable relationships between family tensions and television watching seem to us to be less likely to be general than the effect of mere operation of the television set on family tensions or the use of the television set to reduce tense interaction. Consequently, we predicted

a positive correlation between family tensions and amount of time television sets were on in the home, and we expected the correlation to be stronger in households with a high population density.

### Method

#### Sampling

Data from 64 respondents were available for analysis. Respondents in the study, contacted from July through October of 1973, resided within selected census tracts of the city of Minneapolis. In order to guarantee a broad range of social class and household population density in the sample, census tracts were chosen for sampling on the basis of mean per capita income in 1970 U.S. Census figures. The 10 census tracts with the highest mean per capita income, the 10 tracts with the lowest income, and 15 middle income tracts were chosen. From these tracts, three high, two medium, and three low income census tracts were randomly selected, producing an average mean per capita income in the groups of tracts of \$5864, \$3588, and \$1828 respectively.

The census tracts sampled were zoned as solely residential, and the higher and moderate income tracts consisted solely of single family dwellings. In the lower income tracts there were a few single family dwellings and apartment buildings and a large number of single family dwellings that had been converted into two-family rental dwellings. Two-block sections of streets within census tracts were randomly selected for target sampling. Roughly equivalent numbers of respondents were obtained from high, medium, and low income census tracts.

People living alone and people living in groups of unrelated adults were excluded from the sample. Because we were interested in families in which relationships had achieved some stability in the current residence,



people who had lived in their present home for less than a month were also excluded from the sample. To minimize variability due to changing patterns of behavior caused by weekend and evening activities, respondents were contacted only on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday afternoons from 1:00 P.M. until 4:30 P.M. Fewer than ten people contacted refused to participate. No attempt was made to contact persons not at home at the time a given block was sampled. Individuals who indicated that they were presently too busy to respond to the survey were offered the opportunity of completing the questionnaire at their convenience and mailing it in. Thirteen respondents mailed their questionnaires in. Six people took mailing envelopes but never mailed in a questionnaire. Thus, we contacted approximately 80 people in order to get data from 64. It should be pointed out, however, that because of missing data many statistical analyses reported below are based on fewer than 64 cases.

Every person contacted claimed to be living in a household with an operable television set. Fifty-six of the 64 respondents were female, four were teenagers coresident with parents. The average age of respondents was 38.9. The average family had 4.1 coresident members.

#### Assessment Instrument

The questionnaire contained 37 items. Background variables included age, sex, and occupation of respondent and of all people coresident with respondent. Questions concerning the dwelling included number of rooms in the residence and the activities commonly occurring in rooms containing television sets that might be disrupted by television set operation. Information was collected on the number of hours which each television set in the residence had been turned on over the past 48 hours. The mean

number of hours of home television use over a 24 hour period for the average family member in this sample was 1.63 hours. The mean number of hours of television use over a 24 hour period for the average family was 6.77 hours, which is in the range obtained in surveys of national samples.

Measures of family relations included ratings of the number of conflicts, arguments, disagreements or complaints over television set operation which occurred during the past 48 hours and a set of six questions the responses to which were pooled to give an index of family tension. These six questions are:

Is anyone you live with too critical or faultfinding?

Does anyone you live with often have temper outbursts?

Do you often have temper outbursts?

Is anyone you live with often moody?

Are you often moody?

Do you feel unhappy too much of the time?

Fourteen of the 15 correlations among these six items were positive and 10 were significant by a one-tailed test. Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 coefficient for the six-item measure is .68. }

To check the convergent validity (Campbell & Fiske, 1959) of the six item scale, scores on it were correlated with scores on a 15-point graphic rating scale of dissatisfaction with home life. Convergent validity is indicated by the high correlation between the two measures ( $r=.52$ ,  $N=61$ , one-tailed  $p<.0005$ ). To check the discriminant validity (Campbell & Fiske, 1959) of the six item scale, scores on it were correlated with scores on two 15-point graphic rating scales, one of which measured dissatisfaction with residence and the other of which measured desire to move. If our measure of family tension has discriminant validity it

should not be as strongly related to measures indicating dissatisfaction with things other than family relations as it is to another measure of family life. In fact, the scale measuring family tensions is correlated less with dissatisfaction with residence ( $r=.20$ ,  $N=63$ , one-tailed  $p<.10$ ) and with desire to move ( $r=.10$ ,  $N=61$ ) than with dissatisfaction with home life. Thus, in this rough analysis, the six-item measure of family tension seems to have convergent and discriminant validity.

### Results

There is a strong positive correlation in our sample between amount of time television sets are reported to be on in a household and scores on our six-item measure of family tension ( $r=.42$ ,  $N=63$ , one-tailed  $p<.0005$ ). Social class as measured by an occupational rating is also related to family tension ( $r=-.39$ ,  $N=58$ --the higher the rated social class the less the reported tension), but a partial correlation between television watching and family tensions with social class as the controlled variable is essentially the same as the original correlation (partial  $r=.41$ ). In fact, no conceptual independent variable measured in this study is as good a predictor of family tensions as total amount of time television sets are on. Furthermore, as expected from considerations of frustration and considerations of conflict avoidance, the relationship between television watching and family tension is stronger in households with high population density. It can be seen in Table 1 that in families with a higher population density there is a stronger correlation between tensions and television set operation than in families with a lower population density. The difference in correlations approximates conventional standards of statistical significance, with a one-tailed probability of chance occurrence being .06 by Fisher's Z-test.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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The interpretation of television noise as a source of frustration in crowded residences is bolstered by several additional findings. Household population density is significantly correlated with the number of competing activities which go on in the television room, activities such as talking on the phone, doing homework, sleeping, or writing letters ( $r=.27$ ,  $N=58$ , one-tailed  $p<.025$ ). The greater the density, the more numerous the competing activities in television rooms. The number of competing activities which go on in the television room is also significantly correlated with family tension ( $r=.22$ ,  $N=59$ , one-tailed  $p<.05$ ). Thus, the evidence is suggestive that in homes where the noise and distraction of a television set would be more disruptive there is a higher level of reported tension.

If the operation of television sets is frustrating, one would expect less television watching with higher population density. It would seem reasonable for people to avoid frustration and family tension due to frustration. However, the correlation between household population density and amount of television watching is positive, not negative ( $r=.29$ ,  $N=60$ , two-tailed  $p<.05$ ). In families with relatively low population density people operate the television set less than in families with relatively high population density. This is consistent with the hypothesis that, despite the frustration that may stem from television set operation, television set operation may be used to head off tense interaction.

As was indicated in the introduction to this article, frustration considerations and conflict-avoidance considerations yield competing predictions about the relation of household population density to the correlation between the amount of time the television set is on and the extent of conflict, argument, disagreement and complaint over television set operation. Whereas frustration considerations would lead us to expect a stronger correlation between television set operation and conflict over television set operation where household population density is high, conflict-avoidance considerations lead us to expect the reverse pattern. Table 2 summarizes the results of the analysis. It can be seen in Table 2 that there is a much stronger correlation between conflicts, disputes, etc. over television set operation and amount of time television sets have been operating in families with a low population density than in families with a high population density. The difference between the two correlations is significant by Fisher's Z-test (two-tailed  $p < .001$ ). The difference seems to suggest that a high level of television set operation is frustrating in families with a great deal of space to get away from one another, but in families with little space to get away from one another, operation of the television set is not very objectionable because it is an acceptable avoidance mechanism when interaction is likely to be unpleasant.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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### Discussion

It seems that amount of television watching is valid as an indirect indicator of family tension. As such it can be added to the list of

indirect indicators available to researchers and policy makers and the list of indicators of pathology of use to clinicians.

The data in this study suggest that the relationship between family tension and television watching is due primarily to the use of television watching in order to avoid tense interaction. As is the case with most research that explores new areas, there are undoubtedly alternative interpretations of the data reported here that point to the need for further research. For example, one might argue that the data reported here mean that the kind of people who run their television sets many hours each day, with or without actually attending to the television, are the kind of people who fight a great deal, particularly in crowded living conditions. Further, one might dismiss the data on conflicts, arguments, disagreements, or complaints over television as merely a sign that the kind of people who run the television set a great deal and who also have high levels of conflict feel that frustration over television set operation is trivial compared to other frustrations in their lives. This alternative interpretation, resting on an ad hoc conception of personality bent to fit the data, seems to us to be less persuasive than the social interaction theorizing that led to our hypotheses.

The findings in a study by Maccoby (1954) are congruent with the hypothesis that television watching is used to avoid tense interaction. Maccoby studied the relation of parenting style to amount of television watching by kindergarten-age children of two social classes. She found that in both class groups there was more television watching by children whose parents were not permissive of sex behavior and who frequently spanked. In addition, children in the upper middle class group watched

television more if severely punished for aggression toward parents, if punished for dependent behavior, if expected to obey instantly, or if subjected either to severe demands for good behavior or to maternal coldness. One can speculate that the children receiving harsher parenting were watching more television in order to avoid tense interactions with parents.

If television watching is primarily a means of avoiding tense interaction, then to some extent families are held together and domestic violence is retarded by the operation of television stations. If a strike or power shortage were to put television stations off the air for a substantial amount of time, families would have higher levels of fighting, violence, and break-up. We might similarly expect higher tension levels in families whose television set breaks down (see Steiner, 1963, for anecdotal support of this point).

In America there is a social class difference in television watching, with people of lower income reporting that they watch substantially more television each day (Maccoby, 1954; U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 1973, p. 222). Although one could make a case that the social class difference results from the intellectual level of typical television programs or from the higher level of outside activities and reading of middle class persons, the results of our study suggest that it may be worthwhile to look at population density and family tension in families with lower income. It may be that the average amount of television watching is higher in poorer families because more of these families live in crowded residences. Then, when family tension levels are high, these families are more likely to turn to television watching as a means of delimiting tense interaction.

One can further speculate that in crowded families that watch a considerable amount of television, the television-watching affects more than just conflict levels. Schefflen's (1971) work with families living in very crowded conditions in the East Tremont section of the Bronx suggests that television set operation reduces the amount of time devoted to reading and homework. If students from troubled families do less well in school it may be that their poor performance is in part a result of family attempts to cope with the troubled relations. School performance may be hurt by television set operation or any other means of delimiting tense interaction that are incompatible with doing school work.

We would not argue that television watching is the sole way of avoiding tense interaction. People may always be able to escape to the outdoors, to shopping, community centers, bars, and the like. Professionals can always bury themselves more in their work. Family members may escape to newspaper reading, home workshops, intoxication, or sleep. Couples with children may use interactions with the children as a means of avoiding interaction with each other (Rosenblatt, 1974). But the TV set may be one of the more attractive alternatives.

We certainly would not argue that the avoidance of tense interaction is invariably a bad thing. A tense parent rushing to prepare dinner who puts children in front of the television set to watch Sesame Street may be behaving most adaptively. There may be no better way of dealing with tired, whiny, distracting children. Any child activity that would require more parental attention or more parent-child interaction would make it harder for the parent to get the meal prepared and would increase irritation for all parties. Similarly, family members who are irritable as a result of



fatigue, illness, or other factors exogenous to the family relationship may be choosing by far the wisest course if they choose to avoid other family members by watching television. Television viewing to avoid tense interactions may be harmful where the sources of tension lie within the relationship, are recurrent, and either are not reduced or are aggravated by avoidance of interaction.

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Footnotes

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<sup>2</sup>Requests for reprints should be sent to Paul C. Rosenblatt, Department of Family Social Science, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota, 55108.

Table 1

## Family Tension, TV Watching, and Household Population Density

	Household Population Density	
	Low	High
Range of Scores: Persons Per Room	.10 to .44	.45 to 1.23
Correlation: Tension and Watching	.21	.48
Number of Cases	29	30
One-Tailed P	n.s.	.003

Table 2

## TV Watching and Conflicts over Television Set Operation

	Household Population Density	
	Low	High
Correlation: Conflicts and Watching	.81	.22
Number of Cases	29	30
One-Tailed P	.0005	n.s.