

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 148 309

IR 005 327

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TITLE Television Research: The Potential for Ecological Validity.  
PUB DATE 75  
NOTE 14p.

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Anti Social Behavior; \*Children; Childrens Television; \*Commercial Television; Evaluation; Literature Reviews; \*Programing (Broadcast); \*Research Methodology; \*Television, Research; \*Television Viewing

ABSTRACT

The failure of television research to affect broadcast policy is attributed partially to its methodological inadequacies and its narrow audience. Research tends not to take into account such variables as the program selection behavior itself, the natural viewing context, and other non-content influences. Existing research suggests that television viewing is a parallel rather than an interactive process, but too little has been studied about the effects of television on family interaction and the mediating effects of the family context. These suggest a number of areas which could be profitably investigated. The concept of ecological validity, the sociopersonal as well as the physical context affecting a subject's behavioral system, is a potential strategy for bridging the gap between research and action. It might overcome both methodological and dissemination limitations. The latter problem might be alleviated by making research more comprehensible and accessible to concerned laymen and thus recruit their help in influencing broadcast regulation. (VT)

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TELEVISION RESEARCH: THE POTENTIAL FOR  
ECOLOGICAL VALIDITY

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Television Research: The Potential

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ABSTRACT

The failure of television research in affecting broadcast policy is attributed partially to its methodological inadequacies and its narrow audience. The concept of ecological validity is discussed as a potential strategy in overcoming both methodological and dissemination limitations.

In the years between 1969 and 1973, both congressional and scientific attention centered on the issue of television and its supposed pernicious effects on children (Bogart, 1972; Cater & Strickland, 1972; Murray, 1973; Paisley, 1972; Rubinstein, 1972). Unfortunately, few concrete proposals resulted from these attentions and implementation of network "Family Viewing Times" has temporarily silenced critics of network inertia. A complete explanation of this history of inaction would require going beyond the usual litany of methodological deficiencies in television research to include complex economic and political factors.

Despite a sizeable corpus of data suggesting that television does play a causal role in the production of antisocial behaviors, social scientists cannot conclude that their responsibility in effecting network change is ended. That network officials continue to disregard their work suggests that the findings are inadequately available to the many concerned families who could perhaps influence network policy far more effectively than can data, however convincing the method by which they were obtained. Nevertheless, one source of methodological weakness in television research, its ecological invalidity, may be very much at fault in producing the gap between research and action. Bronfenbrenner (1974) defines ecological validity to include the sociopersonal, as well as the physical context affecting a subject's behavioral system, and concludes that the environment of concern to policymakers is distant from the environ-

ment typical in research design.

Among the contrasts possible between the two environments are the experimental paradigm's nearexclusive reliance on strange situations and personnel, the assumption of unidirectional causality, and the experimental and theoretical isolation of the subject. The distance of this type of research from the social issues that generate it requires a longer inferential leap that persons outside the social sciences are prepared to make. The obligation devolves on social scientists to explore and evaluate dependent variables in settings having identical sociopersonal significance for the subject as that in which the behavior of interest typically occurs.

Ecologically valid research has the potential not only to increase empirical quality but also to contribute significantly to the transmission of findings in a direct way to the nonspecialists, both officials and consumers, who shape network policy. Unfortunately, the body of work dealing with television and behavior is, within Bronfenbrenner's framework, ecologically invalid. Specifically, television research has eliminated the element of choice from the experimental situation, has concentrated on the content of television programming to the exclusion of its other functions, and has divorced television viewing from its home and familial context.

#### Choice: The Unidirectional Fallacy

Typically, studies of the effects of television viewing on subsequent behavior match two or three groups of children and expose them

on a randomized basis to aggressive, nonaggressive, and sometimes pro-social programs. This procedure, although standard, disregards a critical feature of naturally-occurring television exposure, the selection behavior itself.

As research into television effects accumulates, it becomes necessary to control increasing numbers of variables among treatment groups. Matching groups for sex, age, and socioeconomic status is obligatory (Chaney, 1970; Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1972; Friedrich & Stein, 1973; Liebert & Baron, 1972; Maccoby, 1954; Wotring & Greenberg, 1973) and it appears likely that cognitive style (Thomas, 1971), viewing frequency (Cline, Croft, & Courier, 1972), parental attitudes (Atkin, 1972), and existing levels of aggression (Friedrich & Stein, 1973; Wotring & Greenberg, 1973) influence subjects' responses to program content.

Obviously, program variables interact with preexisting characteristics of the viewer in the production of a response. It would seem equally obvious that a viewer's motivation and interest in the program would influence attentional behavior which would, in turn, affect the response being assessed. The choice of what and when to watch is denied the participant in the typical research paradigm, eliminating the personal significance from the viewing behavior. Television viewing is not compulsory outside of experimental situations and it is therefore advised that research broaden its unidirectional model of television's influence to include the choice behavior itself as well as the ways in which choices interact with program content to affect behavior.

## Function: The Educational Fallacy

The standard method of assessing television's effects causes deviation in a second aspect of the natural viewing context. The frequent school or classroom setting, added to the compulsory character of the experimental viewing process, may result in an unwanted learning set in the experimental subjects. This context produces unusually intense attentional and motivational characteristics which are artifacts of the association with school and reflect inaccurately the character of viewing television in other environments. A similar learning set afflicts experimenters as well; theoretical and empirical conclusions emphasize television's informative function to the exclusion of other mechanisms through which its influence may be transmitted.

As Bronfenbrenner (1970) noted previously, television's impact may be greater as a result of what it prevents than as a function of what it presents. Regardless of program content, television reduces conversation and physical activity (Skornia, 1969). Many persons utilize the television set as an undemanding friend (Rue, 1974), to quiet feelings of loneliness, as background noise to accompany other activities such as housework or reading, or as an escape from productive endeavors. (Harrison and Scriven, 1969).

Prevalent research paradigms ignore these non-content influences of television. Television does not serve exclusively, perhaps not even primarily, an educational purpose. The lack of data concerning both interrelations between television viewing and other home-bound activities and the ways in which the reason for television viewing mediates the impact of program content is further evidence of the ecological lapse in much television research. The hope of television pioneers that the medium would serve an educational mission is laudable, but mythical. Research

must broaden its view of the purpose television serves in the lives of its consumers and assess its effects in these more realistic contexts.

#### Social Context: The Dyadic Fallacy

Another of television's missions was to enhance family solidarity by supplying suitable entertainment at minimal cost directly to the home (Maccoby, 1951). Nevertheless, empirical study of television's effects isolates the viewer from the family context, assessing responses either singly or in peer groups. Consequently, too little information has been generated relating patterns of interaction in televiewing families to individual members' responses to television exposure (Rue, 1974).

Some information is available, however, on the effects of television on family interaction itself. Viewing has been demonstrated to be a parallel rather than an interactive process, engaging its participants primarily with itself rather than providing a centerpiece for conversation (Maccoby, 1954; Rue, 1974). Children and adults perceive television viewing quite differently; children report that it comprises the principal family undertaking whereas their parents do not consider it a family undertaking (Greenberg, Ericson, Vlahos, 1971). Personal accounts, such as that of Cline (1973), describe a period of reacquaintance taking place among family members following irretrievable breakdown of the color television, suggesting that television viewing does influence family functioning.

Additional research is needed also to clarify the mediating effects of family context upon television's impact on children's behavior.

Familial mediation may take three forms: attitudes and social training imparted with respect to the acceptability of aggressive behavior,



implementation of family policies regarding utilization of television, and salience of family members as models of televising behavior and attitudes toward violent programming.

Some information on the first two modes is available. In general, amount of viewed violence interacts with parental emphasis on non-aggressive behavior in a predictable way; those children who watch most televised violence and experience least parental pressure to react non-aggressively are those who display most aggressive behavior (Atkin, 1972; Dominick, 1970). Additionally, parents who restrict their children's viewing in order to delete violent shows are typically from higher income brackets, watch little television themselves, and have children with higher IQ's, though these variables influence a child's responsiveness to televised violence in complex ways (Friedrich & Stein, 1973). Rarick (1973) suggests also that parental willingness to impose such restrictions is less influential than the willingness of the child to accept them. His qualification adds a temperamental factor to the matrix of variables under consideration: negativistic children will be less likely to suffer parental restrictions on television viewing and may also be more likely to display aggression regardless of program content.

The role of family members as models for responses to television's influence is almost totally obscure (Paul, 1971), though recent network commercials advocating joint viewing by parent and child imply that such mediation is not only possible, but beneficial. Much of the implied effect is certainly dependent on the specific parental response to televised content and also on that parent's effectiveness as a model for the child. Since children who watch predominantly violent programs tend to do so in the company of one or both parents, particularly in families of

low socioeconomic status (Friedrich and Stein, 1973), it is clear that ample opportunity exists for imitative learning of both program-choice behaviors and affective responses to program content.

As Bronfenbrenner (1974) notes, research over-reliance on two-person systems undermines the ecological validity of much of it. In a large number of television studies, television occupies the status of one of those persons. Studies in which television exposure is examined as a second-order effect upon behavior and those in which parents are assessed as mediators between the television-viewer system are well within the methodological abilities of social science and would provide much pertinent information.

#### Implications

Generally, social science research into televised violence and social behavior has ignored ecological features which impart meaning to the televiewing process. These errors are not intrinsic to the subject and will yield to more thoughtful analyses of the televiewing context and the relevance of that context to behavior. Among areas which might profitably be investigated are:

1. Choice behaviors, not only among programs but also between television and other activities. Viewing motive hierarchies might be constructed differing age groups to illuminate the functions of television at various developmental levels. Also in need of empirical clarification is the variable of compulsory versus self-selected viewing.

2. Context factors, especially the adequacy of the home environment and family process in relation to the type of televiewing patterns exhibited.

3. The perceived purposes of televising, particularly ways in which that perception alters attentional and behavioral responses to television programming.

4. The impact of models as mediators between children and television; whether attitudes of excitement, approval, or distaste are modelled with respect to stimulus properties of program content, whether program preferences are transmitted as modelled behavior, and the salience of various models in the elicitation of imitative behavior.

The influence of ecologically valid research is, of course, unproven. The responsibility for broadcast regulation is so broadly distributed across viewers, sponsors, federal agencies, network officials, and social scientists that it is difficult to determine the point in the cycle to which intervention efforts might most productively be addressed. It is clear, however, that networks are not unilaterally imposing violent programming on unwilling victims; they are receiving tangible reinforcement.

If research pertaining to social policy issues appears in a language and a context which communicates to concerned laymen, perhaps some of the reinforcement will cease. Revision of research standards in the directions suggested would result not only in findings couched in terms that speak beyond the scientific community without sacrificing its respect but in more veridical data as well. To those still hopeful of influencing public policy with data, it is a direction that should at least be tried.

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