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ABSTRACT
        Television situation comedies have been criticized
for their portrayal of dysfunctional family behavior. An exploratory
content analysis study assessed the extent of relationship-enhancing
communication skills in family-oriented, prime-time situation
comedies, a genre frequently targeted for both scorn and praise.
Three episodes each of five shows at the top of the Nielsen ratings
of fall 1990 ("The Cosby Show," "Major Dad," "Roseanne," "The
Simpsons," and "Who's the Boss?") were analyzed for nine
communication skills: courtesy, self-disclosure, affection, active
listening, spending special time together, praise, setting limits,
problem-solving, and teaching a skill or promoting insight. Findings
showed that relationship-enhancing communication skills were
significantly evident, with 1,169 instances portrayed in the 15
episodes analyzed. More than half of them consisted of courtesy and
self-disclosure, with courtesy being the most frequently observed
skill (312 times, or 26.7%), followed closely by self-disclosure (297
times or 25.4%). Affection was expressed 154 times (13.2%). While
"The Cosby Show" was the leader in portraying courtesy and affection,
each program was a leader in portraying at least one
relationship-enhancing skill. Children were portrayed using the
skills, but less often than adults, except when spending special time
together. Findings showed that these pro-social communication
behaviors are evident in programs that have been sharply criticized
as deleterious to viewers, such as "Roseanne" and "The Simpsons," as
well as in programs garnering high praise, such as "The Cosby Show."
(Contains one table of data and 31 notes.) (SR)

Relationship-Enhancing Communication Skills

in Prime-Time Family-Oriented Situation Comedies

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Abstract

Television situation comedies have been criticized for their portrayal of
dysfunctional family behavior. Critics worry that such unhealthy actions by
characters will be imitated by family members, especially children. In contrast,
others have claimed these shows also portray healthy behavior worthy of
imitation. However, there have been few investigations to identify the types and
frequency of specific behaviors whose imitation would be deemed desirable.
This exploratory content analysis assessed the extent of relationship-enhancing
communication skills in family-oriented, prime-time situation comedies. Such
relationship-enhancing communication skills were found to be significantly
evident in the programs analyzed.

Introduction

Critics of highly popular situation comedies such as *Roseanne* and *The Simpsons* have deemed their models of behavior to be harmful to family functioning because they portray unhealthy behavior. Such criticisms are based on the concern that family members, including children, could imitate the dysfunctional behaviors they observe in the interactions between characters.

In contrast to high-profile and vocal critics of situation comedies,[1] others propose that television family interactions are pro-social and worthy of emulation. Dr. Joyce Brothers has gone on record as promoting specific shows which she claims model effective parenting skills worthy of imitation.[2] In addition to respect for the family bond,[3] the modeled behaviors in television families are considered "valuable social resources...which are particularly useful to the imaginative social member for the construction and maintenance of desired relations at home."[4] Fonzie, the *Happy Days* friend of the Cunninghams, modeled a behavior considered positive by teachers as well as parents—applying for a public library card. After that episode aired, there was a "five-fold increase in the number of children applying for library cards in the United States."[5]

More recently, Aust[6] found evidence of numerous interactions that are thought to contribute to healthy family functioning in *The Cosby Show*. During a panel discussion with experts about violence on television, John Leonard, media critic for CBS, suggested some content is non-violent and worthy of emulation. He implied that prime-time television "features more hugging than mugging," and he asked television's critics to provide es. ates of how much hugging is portrayed on prime-time television in addition to all those assessments of "muggings."[7]

Despite claims of pro-social television models of behavior, there are few descriptions or assessments of the extent to which healthy interactions are

portrayed. Yet, television's capacity to portray behaviors that viewers will model is well established.[8] Empirical evidence based on social learning theory[9] justifies concerns that imitation of behavior on television will occur. Singer, Singer, and Rapaczynski[10] have noted that television has as much potential to influence the family as the home environment, parental behavior, and the socio-economic milieu of the family. In fact, numerous researchers have noted that viewers use television families as models.[11]

It would be useful and important, therefore, to conduct an investigation to identify the types and frequency of specific behaviors whose imitation would be deemed socially desirable. This exploratory content analysis offers an assessment of such behavior in family-oriented, prime-time situation comedy, a genre frequently targeted for both scorn and praise.

Research about Television Families. Various content analyses have increased our knowledge about how families are portrayed on television. Skill and Wallace[12] analyzed assertiveness and the ways power is used in prime-time television families. Anti-social acts were the target of investigation by Potter and Ware.[13] Skill, Robinson, and Wallace[14] have documented family-life configurations in prime-time television, examining the frequency with which specific family structures appear on prime-time television. Additionally, models for pro-social and anti-social behavior on prime-time entertainment programs of all types were described by Kaplan and Baxter.[15] And Dail and Way[16] documented the portrayal of different family interaction styles (such as authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, or neutral) and roles (such as directive, aggressive, supportive or flexible) in their analysis of prime-time, family-oriented programs.

Greenberg, Hines, Buerkel-Rothfuss and Atkins[17] analyzed television seasons from 1975 through 1978 for patterns and roles of television family

members. They also assessed quality of family interactions in broad categories such as "positive" or "negative." Other research has examined the extent to which "conventional" and "nonconventional" families have been portrayed on American prime-time television.[18]

The National Institutes of Mental Health, in their summary of research about television's impact, concluded that the behaviors in "television families almost certainly influence viewers' thinking about real-life families."[19] That same report called for further research about the interactions portrayed by families on television.

This exploratory content analysis extends the body of research by examining the extent and types of specific pro-social communication behaviors portrayed in prime-time, family-oriented television situation comedies whose imitation would be considered healthy and desirable.

Relationship-enhancing Communication Skills for Families. The focus of this study on healthy communication acts in families must be grounded in models of such behavior. Three models of family interaction provide the basis for the communication acts to be described and enumerated. They are Guerney's Relationship Enhancement,[20] Gordon's Parent Effectiveness Training,[21] and Lerman's Parent Awareness Training[22] and How To Be A Better Parent.[23]

Although not the only or most well-known prescriptions for healthy family functioning, these models conceptualize and specify communication acts in clear and concrete forms in family systems. They promote functional enhancement through communication strategies rather than remediation through intervention strategies. The three models combined encompass all familial dyadic interaction combinations: adult to adult (Guerney), adult to teen (Gordon), adult to pre-teen (Gordon, Lerman), and adult to pre-schooler

(Gordon, Lerman). Gordon and Lerman's strategies have been applied to dyadic interchanges between children as well.

Gordon[24] offers specific skills such as "active listening," "I-messages" (assertive self-disclosure), and problem-solving, that focus on the parent-child relationship, but can be applied to relationships in general, both in and outside the family. Gordon proposes healthier individual and family functioning as a result of use of these skills.

Guerney[25] offers highly specific behavioral skills to accomplish a number of goals that are thought to increase personal satisfaction with relationships and with oneself, and to effectively solve relationship conflicts. The skills include empathic acceptance, recognizing and accepting one's own and others' feelings, and expressing thoughts and feelings in clear, specific ways. The model applies these skills to adult relationships.

Lerman's work[26] offers many suggestions about a wide variety of concrete, everyday events and issues faced by parents and children. Lerman's approach contributes a day-to-day, "here's what you can do" strategy during family interactions. These include listening in ways that encourage emotional expression, praising desired behavior, problem-solving strategies such as redirecting, and offering choices instead of threats. Lerman also offers teaching approaches about such topics as sexuality, coping with loss and death, and consequences of behavior.

The relationship-enhancing communication skills compiled from these models for the content analysis include:

1. Courtesy - respect shown by politeness, manners, courteous gestures, or apologizing. Some examples are saying "please" and "thank you," knocking instead of barging into a bedroom, helping to carry packages, opening a door for someone.

2. Self-disclosure - sharing thoughts or feelings, whether the emotion is pleasant or unpleasant,[27] in order to aid understanding in a relationship. Somehow the disclosure should help to build intimacy or make one person more "known" to the other. This does not include, however, straightforward statements of information, sarcasm or other verbal abuse, or manipulative tactics.

3. Affection - physical non-verbal affection or affirmation meant to express caring or giving comfort. Examples include a hug or pat on the back.

4. Active Listening - to mirror or reflect back thoughts or feelings. The sender is talking but is mirroring back or reflecting the other person's thoughts/feelings. Empathic responses are included. Examples are "You're really worried about me, aren't you?" "I get the impression you are (thinking/feeling)..." Use of encouragers, such as "mm-hmm" or "I see" or "Let's discuss this" are counted. There must be an intent to help the other person or the relationship in some way, or as an expression of interest or caring.

5. Spending Special Time Together - making an effort, or just incidentally sharing a moment together. This includes eating meals together, watching television together, or engaging in a hobby or other recreational activity together.

6. Praise - praising an effort, accomplishment, or improvement. This can include congratulations or paying a compliment, if it is sincere. Gestures count as well, such as a "thumbs up" for success or laudatory effort.

7. Setting Limits - stating of consequences that will ensue if a behavior is committed; setting a boundary or informing the person that an action is not acceptable. For example, "It's time for bed," "No, you cannot watch television now," or "If you do that again, you can go to your room."

8. Problem-Solving - sharing problem-solving tasks together. This can be a physical effort or sharing ideas. It can take the form of sharing alternatives or considering options to handle a situation. The alternative can be in the form of directing the person from a prohibited or undesirable behavior to a more acceptable or desirable behavior.

9. Teaching - teaching a skill, such as how to throw a ball or how to converse with someone; explaining how to cope with a situation, or promoting insight or understanding about a personal issue, such as sexuality or suffering a loss.

Purpose and Questions. The scope of this study is to focus on specific relationship-enhancing communication skills portrayed in the interactions between characters in family-oriented, prime-time situation comedies. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. To what extent are relationship-enhancing communication skills portrayed by characters in family-oriented, prime-time situation comedies?

2. How many of these skills are portrayed by children?

3. How do top-rated family-oriented, prime-time situation comedies compare to each other regarding frequency of relationship-enhancing communication skills portrayed?

Method

The programs selected for content analysis were *The Cosby Show, Major Dad, Roseanne, The Simpsons,* and *Who's The Boss?* At the time of taping, these programs were the top five family-oriented, prime-time situation comedies, according to Nielsen ratings of fall 1990. They are still broadcast as first-run, prime-time offerings, or are in syndication. All contain a family configuration, a concept based on the schema used by Skill and Wallace:

> Married couples living in the same household with their children,
>
> married couples living in the same household alone, and married couples
>
> sharing a household with one or more members of their extended family
>
> (with or without their children) ... those portrayed as lacking one or both
>
> of the parents and which also feature children who are not at the age of
>
> majority. These configurations include single parents (i.e., divorced,
>
> separated, widowed, or never married) who are responsible for one or
>
> more natural, adopted, or foster children.[28]

The sample of fifteen shows[29] consisted of three episodes of each program. All shows were coded for the nine relationship-enhancing communication skills. The unit of analysis was a communication act as operationally defined in the work of Skill and Wallace (1990), who used this unit of analysis to investigate family interactions on prime-time television:

> A statement or action of one person bounded by the statement or
>
> action of another. Except for the last act in a series of interchanges

(that make up a scene), an act is initiated by the actor's statement or action and it terminates when the statement or action of another begins. Thus, an act may be a lengthy statement, a sentence, a phrase, or a word; it may end at a natural termination point or it may be interrupted by the act of another.[30]

For example, if a wife makes a complimentary statement about her husband's appearance, that would be coded as a communication act. Non-verbal acts were also coded, such as a hug or a shared activity. The actions of two family members hugging each other or watching television together would be coded as a communication act carried out by each member. Singing, performing, or reciting a poem counted as part of one communication act. Intrapersonal communication (thoughts the viewer could hear the characters thinking to themselves) was not coded.

Intercoder reliability coefficients between the primary coder and two others was .96 coding skills, using Holsti's formula for nominal data.[31]

Results

Relationship-enhancing communication skills were significantly evident, with 1169 instances portrayed in the fifteen episodes analyzed. More than half the communication skills consisted of courtesy and self-disclosure. Courtesy was the most frequently observed communication skill, occurring 312 times (26.7%), followed closely in frequency by self-disclosure, which was observed 297 times (25.4%). Affection was expressed 154 times (13.2%).

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Less than one in ten of the portrayed skills involved active listening (*n*=116, 9.9%), spending special time together (*n*=100, 8.6%), praise (*n*=85, 7.3%), setting limits (*n*=40, 3.4%), problem-solving (*n*=39, 3.3%), and teaching (*n*=26, 2.2%).

Table 1 compares each program regarding the frequency of skills used. Chi-square analysis reveals statistically significant differences between programs regarding the communication skill of courtesy, with *The Cosby Show* portraying the most (26.9%) and *The Simpsons* portraying the least (13.8%). *Major Dad* significantly exceeds all other programs in self-disclosure with 28.3%.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Affection was observed more often in *The Cosby Show* (34.4%) than in the other programs, with *The Simpsons* again portraying this communication skill the least (9.2%). A significant difference between programs was also found regarding the skill of active listening, with *Roseanne* leading in frequency with 32.8%. The act of spending special time together also was observed to be significantly different between programs, occurring most often in *The Simpsons*. The entire Simpson family engaged in various activities, such as watching television and attending a truck-pulling contest. Homer Simpson and his son Bart also participated in a golf tournament.

The communication act of praise was observed most often in *Who's The Boss?* (*n*=27, 31.8%) and least often in *The Simpsons* (*n*=9, 10.6%). Although the results were not significa. and very low in frequency, *The Cosby Show* portrayed the most instances of setting limits (*n*=11, 27.5%), while problem-solving was observed most often in *Roseanne* (*n*=11, 28.2%).

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instances of teaching occurred 26 times but they did not appear in each program in sufficient quantity to allow for statistical analysis. Teaching of a skill was portrayed most frequently in *Who's The Boss?* with 9, followed by *Major Dad* with 4, *The Simpsons* with 3, and *Roseanne* with 2. Teaching about consequences of behavior appeared twice in *Who's The Boss?* and once each in *Roseanne* and *The Simpsons*. Teaching about some aspect of sexuality occurred three times in *Roseanne*, which also featured one instance of teaching about death.

Children (coded as a child if the character was under twenty-one) were portrayed using the skills, but less often than adults, except when spending special time together (n=54, 55%). Courtesy was the most frequent skill (n=88, 30.8%) modeled by children. At least one-fourth of the self-disclosure (n=79, 26.6%) and the affection (n=41, 26.6%) were portrayed by children. They were observed in active listening 25 times (21.6%), and they extended praise 13 times (15.3%). Children engaged in problem-solving 12 times (30.8%).

Discussion

This exploratory content analysis offers evidence that relationship-enhancing communication skills are portrayed in highly popular prime-time, family-oriented situation comedies. These pro-social communication behaviors are evident in programs that have been sharply criticized as deleterious to viewers, such as *Roseanne* and *The Simpsons*, as well as in programs garnering high praise, such as *The Cosby Show*.

In two areas *The Cosby Show* did distinguish itself. It was the clear leader in portraying courtesy and affection. Still, none of the five programs dominated in the findings. Each program was a leader in portraying at least one relationship-enhancing communication skill.

Child characters were found to be models of relationship-enhancing communication skills, although consistently less than adults. About one out of four skills were portrayed by children. The most frequently modeled skills by child characters were courtesy, self-disclosure, spending special time together, and affection. These results establish that young viewers are exposed to child models whose behavior is thought to contribute positively to family functioning.

This study is particularly noteworthy in suggesting that relationship-enhancing communication acts do appear in the midst of other contrasting behaviors that many would consider relationship-diminishing and anti-social, such as sarcasm and rudeness. Such a mix of modeled behavior mitigates complete rejection or condemnation of the entire program content as being unsuitable for viewing or imitation. Furthermore, such contrasts might contribute to the prominence and appeal of the pro-social behaviors.

Several suggestions for future research emerge from the limitations of the present study. These results are based on a small sample of programs, and are offered only as a beginning, preliminary exploration of the topic. Analysis of an entire season of episodes is needed to better assess trends in the programs to which frequent viewers are exposed.

Even though coding reliability was acceptable and suggests acceptable validity, predictive validity across a broad spectrum of viewers is not demonstrated by this study. One child viewer might perceive a courteous act as such, while another child viewer might consider it manipulative or superficial. One adult viewer might value a self-disclosure by a spouse as building intimacy between the couple, while another adult viewer might see the self-disclosure as strictly an exchange of information or a source of potential threat to the relationship. Future research could employ age-related coders for analysis of interactions.

The results need to be viewed in light of the particular approaches in the work of Gordon, Guerney, and Lerman. Other models of healthy family functioning could be applied, in addition to the ones on which this study is based. They might reveal different or additional healthy modes of interaction in situation comedy families.

Although a small-scale investigation, this study is important in that it provides descriptions of various types of healthy family interactions modeled in prime-time, family-oriented situation comedies. The findings also demonstrate that highly popular and even controversial situation comedies are portraying family interactions that are thought to have the capability, if imitated by viewers, to enhance relationships and promote healthy functioning among family members. The presence of such dynamics should be of interest to those who study family communication as well as those who study media effects.

NOTES

1. For example, "Dan Quayle vs. Murphy Brown," *Time*, 1 June 1992, 20.

2. Joyce Brothers, "If You Want To Be A Better Parent ... Here Are The TV Moms And Dads You Should Learn From," *TV Guide*, 4 March 1989, 21-25.

3. Richard Zoglin, "Sitcom Politics," *Time*, 21 Sept. 1992, 44-47.

4. James Lull, "The Social Uses of Television," *Human Communication Research* 6 (1980): 199.

5. P. Greenfield, *Mind And Media: The Effects of Television, Video Games, and Computers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 48.

6. Charles F. Aust, *"Relationship-Enhancing Communication Skills in 'The Cosby Show'"* (Paper delivered at Georgia Speech Communication Association Annual Meeting, Macon, GA, 1988, ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 321330).

7. Experts Speak Out, *TV Guide*, 22 August 1992, 12-22.

8. See J. Chesebro, "Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series-A Four-Year Assessment," in *Television: The Critical View (4th ed.)* ed. Horace Newcomb (NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 17-51; B. S. Greenberg, *Life on Television: Content Analyses of U.S. TV Drama,* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1980); R. P. Hawkins and S. Pingree, "Using Television to Construct Social Reality," *Journal of Broadcasting* 25, (1981): 347-364; B. Watkins, "Television Viewing As A Dominant Activity of Childhood: A Developmental Theory of Television Effects," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2 (1985): 323-337.

9. Albert Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication," in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research,* ed. J. Bryant and D. Zillmann (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994): 61-90.

10. J. L. Singer, D. G. Singer, and W. S. Rapaczynski, "Family Patterns and Television Viewing as Predictors of Children's Beliefs and Aggression," *Journal of Communication* 34 (Spring 1984): 73-79.

11. See Greenberg, *Life on Television: Content Analyses of U.S. TV Drama*; J. Kalter, Television As Value-Setter, *TV Guide*, 23 July 1988, 5-11; C. Stroman, "The Socialization Influence of Television on Black Children," *Journal of Black Studies* 15 (Sept. 1984): 79-100.

12. T. Skill and S. Wallace, "Family Interactions on Prime-Time Television: A Descriptive Analysis of Assertive Power Interactions," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 34(3) (1990): 243-262.

13. W. J. Potter, and W. Ware, "An Analysis of the Contexts of Anti-Social Acts on Prime-Time Television," *Communication Research* 14 (December 1987): 664-686.

14. T. Skill, J. D. Robinson, and S. P. Wallace, "Portrayal of Families on Prime-Time TV: Structure, Type and Frequency," *Journalism Quarterly* 64 (Summer 1987): 360-367, 398.

15. S. J. Kaplan, and L. A. Baxter, "Anti-Social and Pro-Social Behavior on Prime-Time TV," *Journalism Quarterly* 59 (Autumn 1982): 478-482.

16. P. W. Dail and W. L. Way, "What Do Parents Observe About Parenting From Prime-Time Television," *Family Relations* 34 (October 1985): 491-499.

17. B. S Greenberg, M. Hines, N. Buerkel-Rothfuss, and C. Atkin, "Family Role Structures and Interactions on Commercial Television," in Greenberg, *Life on Television: Content Analyses of U.S. TV Drama*, 149-160.

18. M. L. Moore, "The Family as Portrayed on Prime-Time Television, 1947-1990: Structure and Characteristics," *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 26(1-2) (1992): 41-62.

19. D. Pearl, L. Bouthilet, and J. Lazar, eds. *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties, Vol. I* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, DHHS Publication No. ADM 82-1196, 1982): 70.

20. B. J. Guerney, Jr., *Relationship Enhancement* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, Inc, 1977).

21. Thomas P. Gordon, *Parent Effectiveness Training* (New York: Peter H. Wyden, Inc., 1970).

22. S. Lerman, *Parent Awareness Training* (NY: A & W Publishers, 1980).

23. S. Lerman, *How To Be A Better Parent* (Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service, 1985).

24. Gordon, *Parent Effectiveness Training*, various pages.

25. Guerney, *Relationship Enhancement*, various pages.

26. Lerman, *Parent Awareness Training*, various pages; Lerman, *How To Be A Better Parent*, various pages.

27. Among other communication professionals to advocate such acts of self-disclosure, B. Strain and P. Wysong, *Communication Skills* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979): 35, succinctly explain the value of such acts: "Discussing feelings can often lead to a better relationship with another person. That person cannot respond to you without knowing how you feel. Even expression of a negative feeling is helpful because it stimulates a discussion that can ultimately improve a relationship." See also G. Goodman, *The Talk Book: The Intimate Science of Communicating In Close Relationships* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1988); J. A. Sanford, *Between People: Communicating One-To-One* (NY: Paulist Press, 1982).

28. T. Skill and S. Wallace, "Family Interactions on Prime-Time Television: A Descriptive Analysis of Assertive Power Interactions," 250.

29. The exploratory nature of the investigation suggested the gathering of a modest, small-scale sample.

30. T. Skill and S. Wallace, "Family Interactions on Prime-Time Television: A Descriptive Analysis of Assertive Power Interactions," 250-251.

31. R. Wimmer and J. Dominick, *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1987).

TABLE 1

Frequency of Communication Skills by Program

	Cosby Show	Major Dad	Roseanne	The Simpsons	Who's The Boss?	x^2
Courtesy 312	26.9% 84	15.7% 49	21.5% 67	13.8% 43	22.1% 69	17.42*
Self-Disclosure 297	13.1% 39	28.3% 84	17.2% 51	20.2% 60	21.3% 63	18.61**
Affection 154	34.4% 53	26.6% 41	14.9% 23	9.2% 14	14.9% 23	32.49**
Active Listening 116	7.8% 9	28.4% 33	32.8% 38	15.5% 18	15.5% 18	24.60**
Special Time 100	4% 4	8% 8	19% 19	54% 54	15% 15	79.10**
Praise 85	18.8% 16	25.9% 22	12.9% 11	10.6% 9	31.8% 27	13.29*
Setting Limits 40	27.5% 11	17.5% 7	12.5% 5	22.5% 9	20% 8	2.50 NS
Problem-Solving 39	23.1% 9	12.8% 5	28.2% 11	20.5% 8	15.4% 6	2.92 NS

Degrees of Freedom = 4, for all analyses.
* $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$