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Although there is a considerable amount of research that has focused on the effects of viewing violent behavior, a substantial number of studies have given attention to the effects of portrayals of prosocial behavior. Researchers suggest that one purpose of prosocial television is to teach socially acceptable attitudes and behaviors, but the messages must be conveyed effectively or prosocial programs fail to achieve their goals. Modeling strategies that are based on social learning theory provide some of the most effective means of portraying valued behaviors. This paper focuses on the characteristics of three modeling strategies and identifies the circumstances under which each is most effective. The strategies include modeling only the prosocial behavior, creating and resolving conflict with prosocial behavior, and presenting conflict without resolution. The prosocial only model is the most effective strategy to convey a prosocial message as is evidenced by laboratory studies and therapeutic situations. The conflict resolution strategy can be effective in presenting prosocial messages if multiple models engage in the prosocial behavior, if the prosocial resolution is given adequate time and attention, and if viewing conditions are sufficient. Unresolved conflict is most effective in classroom settings and therapeutic situations where an adult can provide post-viewing discussion and activity. Contains 34 references. (Author/RS)



Modeling Strategies for Prosocial Television: A Review

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Modeling Strategies for Prosocial Television: A Review

Abstract

Although there is a considerable amount of research that has focused on the effects of viewing violent behavior, a substantial number of studies have given attention to the effects of portrayals of prosocial behavior. Researchers suggest that one purpose of prosocial television is to teach socially acceptable attitudes and behaviors, but the messages must be conveyed effectively or prosocial programs fail to achieve their goals. Modeling strategies that are based on social learning theory provide some of the most effective means of portraying valued behaviors. This paper focuses on the characteristics of three modeling strategies and identifies the circumstances under which each is most effective. The strategies include modeling only the prosocial behavior, creating and resolving conflict with prosocial behavior, and presenting conflict without resolution. The prosocial only model is the most effective strategy to convey a prosocial message as is evidenced by laboratory studies and therapeutic situations. The conflict resolution strategy can be effective in presenting prosocial messages if multiple models engage in the prosocial behavior, if the prosocial resolution is given adequate time and attention, and if viewing conditions are sufficient. Unresolved conflict is most effective in classroom settings and therapeutic situations where an adult can provide post-viewing discussion and activity.



Modeling Strategies for Prosocial Television: A Review

INTRODUCTION

Antisocial Behavior

The late 1950s and early 1960s recorded a growing concern over portrayals of antisocial behavior on television and its effects on viewer behavior. Although the social impact of the mass media had been called into question several years earlier, it was the experiments of Bandura and Berkowitz (summarized in Comstock, 1975) that brought the effects of television content on behavior under scrutiny. Their experiments indicated aggressive behavior could be learned by viewing violent content. The federal government commissioned several subcommittees to investigate the possible link. Based on the available research at the time, the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior (1972) suggested there might be a causal relationship between viewing violence and aggressive behavior. The committee's assessment of experimental and survey research tended toward the causal relationship, but evidence from field studies was much less pronounced. The committee, therefore, qualified their findings by noting that aggressive behavior of children caused by television violence is likely to be attributable to the fact that viewers were predisposed in that direction. Ten years later, an update of the Surgeon General's Report was completed. The conclusions revealed that among the research community there was a consensus that violence on television leads to aggressive behavior (National Institute of Mental Health, 1982).

Prosocial Behavior

While the majority of the literature has focused on the effects of viewing violent behavior (Comstock, Chaffee, & Katzman, 1978), a substantial number of studies have given attention to the effects of portrayals of prosocial behavior. These studies demonstrated that children imitate forms of prosocial behavior such as altruism, helping, delay of gratification, high standards of performance, and positive social interaction when



exposed to models engaged in such behaviors (Hoffman, 1970; Staub, 1971). Hearold (1986) concluded in her meta-analysis that:

Although fewer studies exist on prosocial effects, the effect size is so much larger, holds up better under more stringent experimental conditions and is consistently higher for both boys and girls, that the potential for prosocial overrides the small but persistent negative effects of antisocial programs (p. 135).

Comstock (1989) attributed Hearold's findings to the fact that the prosocial messages were designed to have an influence on the viewers, while the antisocial messages were often contained in entertainment programs not intended for such purposes. He also noted the measured behavior was quite often similar, if not identical, to the portrayed behavior.

Despite the acknowledged shortcomings, the findings of studies on prosocial behavior heightened the interest in how to capitalize on the potential benefits of prosocial television. Johnston and Ettema (1986) noted television that models socially accepted attitudes, beliefs, values and behavior is television used to best advantage. Johnston and Ettema reviewed the relevant literature on what makes effective prosocial video. They identified several program characteristics that have been examined in the research for prosocial television. These characteristics include formal elements, viewer characteristics, program formats, structural elements, modeling strategies, form-content relationships and principles of program design.

One purpose of prosocial television is to teach socially acceptable attitudes and behaviors, but the messages must be conveyed effectively or prosocial programs fail to achieve their goals. Though each factor identified by Johnston and Ettema holds a place of importance in prosocial research, understanding the most effective methods of portraying the valued behaviors is, in a sense, more important than any of the other factors that contribute to prosocial video. If the message is not understood, then the effort to teach prosocial behavior is futile. Therefore, the focus here will center on modeling strategies. Attention to these strategies will provide a clearer understanding of the



characteristics of each and identify the circumstances under which each strategy is most effective.

THREE MODELING STRATEGIES

Lovelace and Huston (1983) identified three modeling strategies. Although these strategies have the potential to teach prosocial behavior to adults, most of the attention has centered on the effects these strategies have on children. It makes sense to pursue a phenomenon that can teach socially valued attitudes and behaviors to young viewers, since the most formative years of one's life occur during childhood. However, television producers and programmers wrestle with the problem of how to create a program with prosocial messages that is interesting and entertaining enough to keep children's attention. Although some programs contain prosocial behavior, positive effects on young viewers cannot be inferred. Therefore, a significant contribution of scientific research is the identification of those methods that communicate socially accepted messages clearly to children (Lovelace & Huston, 1983).

Before proceeding with a discussion of the strategies, one must understand that television programs have different goals. Commercial programs attempt to capture the largest audience possible. Noncommercial programs may be designed to present clear, effective messages and be interesting for children. Or, they may be produced for classrooms or therapeutic situations, often supplemented with materials to invoke discussions and clarify the intended message. Therefore, when considering using one of the three modeling strategies for prosocial behavior, it is important to know the goal of the program in which it will be used because one strategy is more effective in certain situations than are the others.

The first strategy identified by Lovelace and Huston is modeling only the prosocial behavior. They cite a character being generous without selfishness or courageous without fear as examples of this strategy. The drawback of this technique is its lack of dramatic impact.



A second technique involves creating and resolving conflict within the program that the model of prosocial behavior encounters. The model exhibits prosocial behavior, and either the model or others engage in antisocial behavior, thus creating a conflict. Positive consequences are attributed to prosocial behavior and negative consequences to antisocial behavior. By observing the consequences of the behaviors, the children are expected to learn the appropriate responses. Conflict helps maintain the viewer's interest, but the drawback to the technique is the potential for the antisocial behaviors to be imitated along with the prosocial.

The third strategy is similar to the second because it centers on the presentation of conflict between prosocial and antisocial behaviors. The difference is that there is no conflict resolution contained within the program. The viewer is supposed to come up with a solution for the conflict. This technique is designed to make the child think about what has been seen and come up with a potential solution. The problem with this strategy is that the child may not generate an acceptable solution or he may imitate the inappropriate behavior.

THE LITERATURE

Silverman and Sprafkin (1980) conducted a series of studies examining all three modeling strategies. Their research focused on teaching cooperation to 3, 5, and 7-year olds through segments of *Sesame Street*. Program segments containing prosocial behavior only or conflict resolution were compared with neutral segments in the first study. Pairs of children were observed after viewing. They were engaged in the Madsen marble game. In order to win, the children had to cooperate with one another by taking turns. Silverman and Sprafkin reported there was no more cooperation among the children who had seen the prosocial only or the conflict resolution segment than those who viewed the neutral spot. A later study involving 3-year olds found segments of unresolved conflict to produce less cooperation among the subjects as compared to subjects exposed to neutral segments. These findings suggest that conflict without resolution can be



counterproductive for very young children with no post-viewing guidance (Lovelace & Huston, 1983). Lovelace and Huston (1983) contend that failure of any of the three modeling strategies to increase cooperation may have been a result of the brief presentation of the segment and/or the artificial nature of the cooperation. Silverman and Sprafkin (1980) noted their findings suggest that when designing prosocial material that contains conflict, caution should be used when very young children are the intended audience.

Social learning theory

The three modeling strategies are based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). This theory holds that viewing modeled behaviors results in imitation of those behaviors. Emulation of behaviors requires attention to the portrayal, comprehension of the behavior, the ability to recall the behavior in a situation that motivates its display, and the physical ability to perform. Reinforcement or punishment of the observed behaviors serves as a guide to viewers to understand the consequences of such behaviors. Rehearsal and verbal description of the behavior also lead to an increase in learning the modeled behavior.

Prosocial behavior only

Many of the studies cited by Lovelace and Huston (1983) in which prosocial behavior alone was presented were designed to test social learning theory in some way. Experimental studies designed to reduce certain fears in children were conducted in the late sixties and early seventies. One such study attempted to reduce the fear of dogs. Bandura and Menlove (1968) exposed children who were afraid of dogs to eight different 3-minute movies of unafraid children either alone or in groups, who encountered a dog, got close enough to pet it, and fed the dog. One month after viewing, previously fearful children were placed in a situation to interact with an unfamiliar dog. Those who had seen the films of the children interacting with the dog without any fear displayed an increase in their approach behavior. Those subjects who had seen the groups of children approach



the dog showed the greatest long-term effects. Studies of this nature indicate fear may be effectively reduced and courageous behavior increased through exposure to brief films (Lovelace & Huston, 1983).

Other studies focused on social interaction. O'Connor (1969, 1972) examined the change in behavior of nursery school children who had been identified by their teacher as socially withdrawn. A 23-minute film of pre-school children engaging in activities with their peers was shown to the subjects. Observations noted an increase in social interaction among the withdrawn subjects that was maintained 3-6 weeks after viewing. Along the same lines, Keller and Carlson (1974) examined social interaction and positive social reinforcement by presenting four 5-minute films to withdrawn subjects. The behavior of the models included smiling at others, giving objects to them, imitating them, talking and showing affection toward them. As a result of viewing, verbalization, smiling and imitation increased among withdrawn subjects. This led to an increase in positive exchanges among the children.

Sharing has also been a topic of several studies. One study (Susman, 1976) noted a significant increase in sharing of preschoolers who had been exposed to a television game show in which the models gave away some of their winnings as compared to those who did not see the show. The effects were most evident when children were in a situation similar to the one they had seen, while the effects were less pronounced in new situations.

Sprafkin, Liebert and Poulos (1975) reported an experiment designed to determine if the presentation of a specific act of helping in a highly successful commercial television program (Lassie) would produce similar behavior in young viewers placed in similar situations. The experimenters showed the three video segments to the subjects. The experimental video was a segment from Lassie in which Lassie tries to hide her puppy so it will not be given away. The puppy slips into a mine shaft, and Lassie's master, Jeff, risks his life by hanging over the edge to save the puppy. The first control condition featured another segment from Lassie, but there was no example of a human helping a dog. The



second control condition showed a clip from the *Brady Bunch*, which provided a measure of children's willingness to help after viewing a program that emphasized positive family interaction but had nothing to do with humans rescuing dogs.

After viewing, the subjects were asked to listen through headphones for noises from a kennel a few miles away. If they heard dogs barking the children were instructed to press a "help" button. The results indicated those subjects who saw Lassie held the help button much longer than those exposed to the neutral Lassie or the Brady Bunch segments. The researchers concluded that under some circumstances, a child's willingness to help could be increased through viewing a televised example. In addition, they noted the results support social learning theory to the extent that the effects of the televised example were mediated by specific modeling cues that were interpreted by the children, rather than by the general positive format of the show.

From their review of the relevant studies, Lovelace and Huston (1983) concluded the prosocial only model is effective in producing prosocial behavior in viewers. This model offers the advantage of presenting messages clearly and unambiguously. However, its disadvantages include the use of brief segments produced specifically for use in a laboratory setting, as well as measures of behavior in an artificial environment. Thus, generalization to other situations may be limited. The problem of producing interesting programming that draws an audience and keeps its attention still exists. Lovelace and Huston argued for the need to develop new production styles that hold an audience's attention without relying on conflict for plot development. They noted a variety of formats including game shows, interviews and dramatic presentations were employed by the studies in which prosocial behavior was presented alone. Their review also led to the conclusion that presentation of prosocial behavior only is quite effective, especially when behaviors are presented in small sequential steps with multiple models. The behavioral changes of children tend to occur in the real world and endure over time.



Prosocial conflict resolution

Television programming presenting only prosocial behavior has been rare.

Typically, prosocial behavior is presented in contrast to antisocial or aggressive behavior in commercial television. Lovelace and Huston (1983) attempted to answer the question regarding the effectiveness of prosocial messages presented along with antisocial messages by examining the studies that investigated the second modeling strategy, prosocial conflict resolution.

Paulson (1974) investigated the effects of modeling prosocial and antisocial behavior designed to teach cooperation in *Sesame Street*. Findings of this six-month field test indicated children who saw the programs with these segments recognized cooperation when they saw it. They also scored higher on measures of cooperation when placed in a similar situation as compared to children who did not see the programs. However, an increase in prosocial behavior during free play was not found. Bankart and Anderson (1979) produced results consistent with Paulson. Bankart and Anderson did find reduced levels of aggressive behavior after viewing four days of *Sesame Street*. Children with low baseline levels of giving positive reinforcement and punishment were found to increase in those behaviors after viewing *Sesame Street*.

Lovelace and Huston (1983) concluded these brief presentations of cooperative behavior did not lead to a generalized increase in cooperation, even though the segments were successful in transmitting verbal understanding of the behavior and led to direct imitation of it.

Experiments involving Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood found preschool children do learn prosocial behavior that, at times, is generalized to their everyday behavior (Lovelace & Huston, 1983). Children who saw Mr. Rogers' over a four-week period were recorded as showing higher levels of task persistence as compared to those who saw neutral or aggressive programs. Increases in cooperation, nurturance and verbalization of feelings were observed for children from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Stein & Friedrich, 1972; Friedrich & Stein, 1973).



Children in urban Head Start centers showed no increase in prosocial behavior after viewing Mr. Rogers' as part of their ongoing school experience (Friedrich-Cofer, Huston-Stein, Kipnis, Susman, & Clewett, 1979). These same children did show an increase in positive social interaction and imaginative play, as well as assertiveness and aggression when the programs were supplemented with related materials like puppets, records and costumes. Teacher-directed activities, along with supplemental materials, produced signs of increased positive social and assertive behavior, but did not increase aggression.

Friedrich and Stein (1975) investigated post-viewing rehearsal for promoting learning and generalization. They noted that for television effects to be worthwhile, it must be demonstrated children can learn something from a presentation of complex material and generalize what they learn to other situations over time. The study assessed the effects of viewing prosocial behavior alone and in combination with training on learning and helping behavior. The two training techniques, verbal labeling and role playing, followed episodes of *Mr. Rogers'*. Results provided evidence that the children did learn the prosocial behavior and generalized it to real world situations. The effects of verbal labeling had the greatest impact on verbal measures of learning and generalizing program content for girls. For boys, high levels of learning were recorded when verbal labeling was combined with role playing. Helping behavior was increased among boys as a result of role playing. Girls tended to show the greatest increase in helping behavior when both methods of training were used. Therefore, learning the prosocial content of the program was enhanced by verbal labeling, while role playing helped children generalize the television behaviors to their own behaviors.

Lovelace (1980) investigated post-viewing activities and found scores among subjects to be consistently high for learning of content and generalization. However, there was no evidence of difference among subjects who engaged in post-viewing activities and those who simply viewed.



The television series, *Freestyle*, designed to reduce sex-role stereotypes among 9-12 year olds, was effective in changing children's stereotypic beliefs about males and females (Johnston & Ettema, 1982; Johnston, Ettema, & Davidson, 1980). *Freestyle* developed the second modeling strategy into a clearly articulated and applied formula (Johnston & Ettema, 1986). The formula included featuring characters that chose to perform nonstereotypic behaviors but were faced with difficulties as a result. At times others created these problems, but often it was the character that created the obstacles. In the end, the character masters the nonstereotypical behavior and overcomes the difficulties, and is rewarded for doing so (Johnston & Ettema, 1986).

Lovelace and Huston (1983) concluded from the literature that prosocial behavior may be learned through the conflict resolution modeling strategy, but these behaviors may not be generalized to children's everyday behavior. The researchers noted that short, didactic segments like those presented on *Sesame Street* are useful for cognitive learning, but dramatic story lines, similar to those in *Mr. Rogers'* and *Freestyle*, are more effective in helping children generalize the prosocial behaviors to real life situations. The conflict resolution strategy is most effective when a greater portion of the program is devoted to prosocial behavior and when post-viewing rehearsal or discussion follow. It is possible children will adopt the maladaptive behaviors as well as the prosocial one, as was the case with the Head Start children. In such cases the researchers recommended adult intervention to help children distinguish between those behaviors that should be limited as compared to those to be avoided.

Commercial programs also employ the conflict resolution strategy with some effectiveness. Collins and Getz (1976) found an increase in children's willingness to help a peer in a task after viewing an action adventure in which investigators gathered clues, negotiated and collaborated to clear a police captain of bribery charges. The aggressive version resolved the conflict with a fist fight and gunfire. Shows like *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Happy Days*, and *The Waltons* have been documented as showing small increases in



children's prosocial behavior (Ahammer & Murray, 1979). However, long-term effects on children's classroom behavior is still in question (Sprafkin & Rubinstein, 1979).

Lovelace and Huston (1983) observed that negative effects might occur if the prosocial behavior is not in clear contrast to the antisocial behavior. Liss and Reinhardt (1979) found an increase in aggressive behavior among subjects who watched the cartoon series, *Superfriends*. The aggressive behavior was more evident than either antisocial or prosocial behavior alone, maybe because the prosocial characters demonstrated justification for their violence.

Conflict without resolution

Presentation of unresolved conflict is the third modeling strategy. Often program content using this strategy deals with situations encountered while growing up, such as parental pressure, male/female relationships, sibling rivalry, privacy and friendship. The character within the program is seen struggling with a particular problem. At the end of the program the character must make a decision to resolve the problem, but no decision is made. Children are encouraged to discuss a possible solution with others. These discussions can lead from program specific instances to situations of personal experience. Often these type of programs, like Inside Out, Self Incorporated and On the Level, are used in a classroom setting to stimulate discussion. They may also be used for therapeutic use. Home viewing of these programs might result in unpredictable effects as well as frustration on the part of the viewer (Lovelace & Huston, 1983). Formative research on particular programs (Rockman, 1976, 1980) indicated children do understand and learn the program content and generate prosocial solutions to the problems portrayed rather than antisocial. Other research, however, indicated limited potential for prosocial change (Johnston, Blumenfield, & Isler, 1983). Children younger than 7 or 8 might not benefit from this modeling strategy as effectively as older children (Lovelace & Huston, 1983).



Conclusions

Lovelace and Huston (1983) concluded film and television programs can present prosocial ideas and behaviors effectively to children above the age of three. They assessed that the prosocial only model is the most effective strategy to convey a prosocial message as is evidenced by laboratory studies and therapeutic situations. Television producers continue to hold onto conflict and contrast as the key elements of dramatic presentation, and as a result there are few programs that contain prosocial only behavior. However, the conflict resolution strategy can be effective in presenting prosocial messages if multiple models engage in the prosocial behavior, if the prosocial resolution is given adequate time and attention, and if viewing conditions are sufficient. More generalized effects will occur when behaviors of cooperation, helping and being sensitive are presented among a variety of ordinary people in real life, everyday situations. Children's behavior is influenced more by dramatic story formats than brief segments of the prosocial message. The program is often enhanced when supplemental techniques like post-viewing rehearsal, discussion and related play are used. The third modeling strategy, unresolved conflict, is most effective in classroom settings and therapeutic situations where an adult can provide post-viewing discussion and activity. This strategy had unknown effects when viewed in unsupervised circumstances (Lovelace & Huston, 1983).

DISCUSSION

Nearly twenty-five years ago Sprafkin, Liebert and Poulos (1975) observed:

It is possible to produce television programming that features action and adventure, appeals to child and family audiences, and still has a salutary rather than negative social influence on observers. A detailed understanding of the modeling processes involved in such influences may contribute to the production of other socially desirable programs in the future (p. 125).

Yet, today producers continue to wrestle with the best strategy to employ. The literature indicates positive effects can be achieved when the proper strategy is used. However, producers are not ready to deviate from the proven formula of conflict as a



means to an attentive audience. They voice a desire to present more prosocial television, but their actions say otherwise. Until producers take a closer look at the research, television will not be used to best advantage. These modeling strategies can be used to create interesting, socially valued television, but if producers fail to take advantage of what the research has to offer, it may have been in vain.

Too often, the short-term effects of planned programming are not the desired result, or the effects size is not sufficient to continue a program, so it is cancelled. Other programs, like *Freestyle*, may achieve the desired results, but programmers dislike the slow process of development and end up canceling a show that worked. The benefits of such shows eventually outweigh the slow, painful beginning, but programmers are quick to pass judgment. Programs need time to develop, and programmers must recognize this fact. Once the initial stages of development are completed, the time it takes to produce a series or similar programs is greatly reduced (foreword in Johnston & Ettema, 1982).

Funding for planned programming is scarce. The federal and state governments have made major budget cuts, thus reducing resources available for planned programming and public television in general. It is going to take resources from commercial producers to continue the development of purposive programming (foreword in Johnston & Ettema, 1982).

The research has made its contribution; it is time for commercial producers and programmers to make theirs.



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