

PARENT OBSERVED BEHAVIOURS OF PRESCHOOL TELEVISION VIEWERS²

VALERIE BRAITHWAITE and JACQUELINE HOLMAN

Australian National University

The home television viewing patterns of 282 preschool children attending the Lady Gowrie Child Centres were investigated. By means of parental reports, data were collected on the following issues: (a) how much television children of this age viewed; (a) the behaviour children engaged in while watching television; (c) the programmes they enjoyed most; and (d) the extent to which preschoolers copied and idolized things seen and heard on television. Differences in viewing patterns were clearly evident with children from lower socioeconomic families tending to be higher viewers, to engage in more distractable behaviours as they watched the television, and to be less impressed by educational programmes.

Additionally, boys were found to watch more television than girls and single children to watch more than children with siblings. The potential importance of style of viewing and not simply amount viewed as a variable in understanding the effect of TV viewing on children is discussed.

In recent years, the importance of television as a socializing agent has been widely recognized (Leifer, Gordon, & Graves, 1974; Liebert, Neale, & Davidson, 1973). A host of studies, based on Bandura's (1969) conceptualization of observational learning, has been conducted to show that children learn both prosocial and anti-social behaviours from models they observe on television (cf. Moore, 1977; Stein & Friedrich, 1975). Such behaviours are not necessarily manifested at the time of learning, but are acquired and may subsequently be performed should the appropriate circumstances arise (Hicks, 1965).

Success in empirically demonstrating that television influences child behaviour, in both laboratory and real life settings, has generated considerable

concern for the well-being of children who spend a significant proportion of the day engaged in this activity. With school age children, heavy viewing has been found to be related to a number of factors: low self-esteem, poor social relations, underachievement, low intelligence, and low socioeconomic status (Edgar, 1977; Feilitzen, Filipson, & Schyller, 1980). These findings have been based on correlational studies and therefore fail to clarify the direction of causality, if indeed any causal link exists between these variables and television viewing. While longitudinal data needs to be collected to fully understand these relationships, some insight into the development of these patterns might be obtained by examining their emergence (albeit in a correlational model) during early childhood.

Considerable effort has already been expended in identifying school children's viewing habits and their demographic, behavioural and personality correlates, but less active research has been directed toward how these patterns develop in early childhood. In the United States, Lyle and Hoffman (1972) estimated that

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Requests for reprints should be sent to either author, Psychology Department, Australian National University, P.O. Box 4, Canberra, A.C.T. 2600.

preschoolers watch 21.5 hours per week, while Friedrich and Stein (1973) report 34.2 hours. In Canada, young children (2 to 6 years) were found to watch 20 hours per week (Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts, 1978). Schiller (1979) noted that relatively little is known about the viewing habits of preschool children in Australia. One study focusing specifically on preschoolers, however, suggests that they spend somewhat less time in front of the television; from Howells' (1968) data for children attending a Canberra preschool, the median daily quota ranges from 1 to 2 hours.

While hours spent in front of the TV set is undoubtedly relevant to an understanding of the effects of television, it tells us little about how preschoolers watch television in their home environment or what impact this subsequently has on their behaviour. Recent research has begun to investigate this issue by analysing what young children actually do when allowed to watch television in a laboratory setting. For example, Anderson, Alwitt, Lorch, and Levin (1979) found that children begin purposive, systematic television viewing between 2 and 3 years of age. Visual attention did fluctuate, however, with children looking away from the screen quite frequently (Anderson & Levin, 1976). The amount of attention is reported to vary with the presence of distractors such as toys (Levin & Anderson, 1976), and with the features of the programmes themselves (Anderson et al., 1979). The existence of reliable individual differences in visual attention and other viewing behaviours for children under 5 years, was also noted by Anderson et al., but they were unable to relate viewing style to either personality or intelligence measures.

The recent efforts of Anderson and his colleagues have yielded valuable information regarding the emergence of TV viewing patterns and the potentially

pervasive influence of the medium. Nevertheless, these studies suffer from a weakness present in all laboratory research, i.e. that the generalizability of the data is questionable. Thus, findings based on data gathered in more naturalistic settings would ensure that the implications drawn from research efforts are ecologically valid (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

The present study therefore focuses on the viewing patterns of preschoolers in their *home* environments. In particular, the study evaluated the types of behaviours in which children engaged while watching television; the amount of TV viewed; which programmes were preferred; and the delayed effects of such viewing as observed by parents. Furthermore, individual differences in the ways in which children of this age interact with the medium were examined by relating the above four variables to three characteristics of the children and their families — the sex of the child, and the size and socioeconomic status of the family.

METHOD

Respondents

The sample comprised 282 parents, mainly mothers who had at least one child attending a Lady Gowrie Centre in a capital city in Australia. Questionnaires were distributed to 85% of parents who had a child enrolled at these centres at the time of the research. Of those whose cooperation was sought, 64% returned completed questionnaires, giving a sample of 289 respondents. Seven participants who did not have television at home were subsequently excluded from the analysis, leaving a final sample of 282.

With regard to the children of these respondents, the breakdown by sex was 58% male and 42% female. By age, 26% were between 3 and 4 years, 52% were between 4 and 5 years, and 22% were between 5 and 6 years. The sample was

notably biased in favour of high socioeconomic families. Socioeconomic status was indexed by the occupation of the male head of the household as classified by Broom, Jones, and Zubrzycki (1965).

Three broad categories were used as follows: (1) high — head of the household in a professional or managerial occupation; (2) medium — head of the household in a skilled, clerical or sales occupation; and (3) low — head of the household in an unskilled or semi-skilled occupation. In the present study, 54% of respondents came from the high socioeconomic group, 29% from the medium socioeconomic group, and 17% from the low socioeconomic group.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to elicit information relevant to the following areas of interest from a parent or guardian of each child. First, data were sought on the television habits of preschoolers — how much they watch, what they watch, what they do while they watch, and how their behaviour away from the TV set appears to be influenced by television. In addition, five other topics were covered: (a) parents were asked to express their attitudes on the effects of television on children in general; (b) parents' opinions were sought on the suitability of current TV programming for their child; (c) data were collected on the leisure patterns of both parents; (d) information was sought on the extent to which parents exercised control and influence over what preschoolers watched and learnt from television; and (e) data were gathered regarding the demographic characteristics of the family.

Procedure

The staff of the Lady Gowrie Child Centres distributed the questionnaire to parents when they came to the centre to

pick up their children. One parent of each child, usually the mother, was asked to respond to the questionnaire and return it to the centre on completion. Boxes for returned questionnaires were made available at the centres to ensure anonymity.

RESULTS

General Viewing Patterns

Behaviour while viewing. Parents were asked to indicate the extent to which their child displayed the following behaviours while watching television: (a) being quiet and attentive, (b) playing with other children, (c) playing with toys, (d) copying characters on television, and (e) running around, not watching much. Responses were made on a three point rating scale: (1) hardly ever, (2) sometimes, and (3) most of the time. An open ended question allowing parents to specify other viewing activities failed to reveal any viable alternatives in the categories supplied to respondents.

The data indicated that the majority of children watched television in a quiet and attentive manner. From Table 1, 57% of parents reported their child to be quiet and attentive for most of the time. Furthermore, most children (55%) had been observed copying the characters they were watching on television at least sometimes. Despite this evidence of purposive viewing in preschoolers, the data also indicated that the majority were distracted at least sometimes through playing with other children (67%), playing with toys (66%), and running around (58%).

Amount viewed. Parents were required to estimate the number of hours their preschooler watched TV on each day of the week. These estimates were totalled for each child and were found to vary from 0 to 45 hr per week, with a mean of 11.26 hr. Because of the positive skew of the distribution, the median was found to be somewhat lower, 9.96 hr.

Programme preferences. Data on programme preferences were obtained through parents asking children what their three favourite shows were and recording these responses. Parents were requested to question children at times when they were not watching television.

Of the 87% who recorded a response, 64% of the children were reported to have mentioned educational programmes (e.g. Sesame Street, Play-school), 39% child oriented variety shows (e.g. Humphrey Bear, Muppets), and 38% cartoons. Eighteen percent of children nominated a science fiction show (e.g. Batman, Dr. Who), 14% light family comedy (e.g. Gilligan's Island, Happy Days), and 11% family drama (e.g. The Sullivans, Little House on the Prairie).

Delayed effects of viewing. Information regarding the delayed effects of viewing was obtained through two questions. First, parents were asked whether or not their child idolized any TV characters, and if so which ones. Second, parents were required to indicate whether or not they had observed their children copying things seen or heard on television, and to describe such behaviour.

In 48% of cases, instances of idolizing were reported. These children were most likely to idolize supernatural heroes, puppets (including Muppets), and cartoon characters (see Table 2). It is of note that male characters were more frequently idolized than female characters.

Copying things from television was found to be more widespread, with 90% reporting that their child engaged in such behaviour. Respondents' reports were classified for the purposes of data analysis into two groups, gross motor (e.g. eating like Cookie Monster, running around like Superman), and verbal behaviour (e.g. singing or counting). The latter category proved to be

TABLE 2
Frequency with which Children who Idolize identified with Each Character Type

Character	Percent identifying with character
Supernatural heroes e.g. Batman, Steve Austin (Six Million Dollar Man)	46
Puppets — Muppets e.g. Cookie Monster, Miss Piggy	33
Cartoon characters e.g. Fat Cat, Fred Flintstone	25
Light family comedy male characters e.g. Fonzie	9
Supernatural heroines e.g. Wonder Woman	7
'Real' heroes e.g. Starsky and Hutch, Cisco Kid	7
Female comperes of children's shows	5
Light family comedy female characters e.g. Laverne and Shirley	3
'Real' heroines e.g. Charlie's Angels	0
Male compares of children's shows	0

Note: As each child could idolize more than one character, percentages in the table do not sum to one hundred.

TABLE 1
Child Behaviours Displayed While Viewing TV
(Row Percentages)

Behaviour	Hardly ever	Some-times	Most of the time	(n)
Is quiet and attentive	6%	37%	57%	(270)
Plays with other children	33%	55%	12%	(258)
Plays with toys	34%	53%	13%	(265)
Copies characters on TV	45%	52%	3%	(265)
Runs around/doesn't watch much	42%	44%	14%	(262)

the more popular, though in many cases both were present. Sixty-four percent of cases of copying were of a verbal nature, compared with 49% which were gross motor.

Differences in Viewing Style

Apart from identifying general viewing patterns among preschoolers, differences in viewing style were examined in relation to the sex of the child, family size, and socioeconomic status.

Sex. Boys were found to watch television on average for 12.06 hr per week which was significantly higher than the girls' average of 10.01 hr ($t(282) = 2.47, p < .02$). With respect to programme preferences, differences were not marked, though boys appeared to be slightly more inclined to mention cartoons amongst their favourites than girls ($\chi^2(1) = 4.83, p = .03$).

Controlling for amount viewed, sex was crosstabulated with behaviours observed while watching TV, and subsequent idolizing and copying activities. For this analysis, amount viewed was collapsed into three categories: light (0-7 hr), moderate (8-14 hr), and heavy (15-45 hr). Among light viewers, boys were more likely than girls to copy as they watched television ($\chi^2(2) = 7.14, p = .03$) and to engage in idolizing of TV characters ($\chi^2(1) = 6.15, p = .01$). These relationships were not found to be significant, however, for moderate or heavy viewers. Sex differences were not found in the other behaviours in which children engaged while watching TV, nor in the extent to which they subsequently copied things seen on television.

Family size. The most interesting finding in relation to family size was that single children watch significantly more television than those with siblings. The mean weekly viewing rate for only children was 14.40 hr com-

pared with 10.62 for children with siblings ($t(278) = 3.46, p < .001$). It is of note that this relationship could not be explained by other variables associated with amount viewed such as sex or socioeconomic status. Family size did not appear to substantially affect either viewing or post-viewing behaviour, although a significant relationship was obtained between number of siblings and playing with other children while watching television ($\chi^2(4) = 10.39, p = .03$). As expected, single children were less likely to engage in this activity.

Socioeconomic status. The lower the socioeconomic status of the family, the higher were parental reports of how much television preschoolers were watching ($r(226) = -.30, p < .001$). For the present data set, social class was not associated with other correlates of amount viewed such as sex and family size. Thus, in the current study, no evidence was uncovered to suggest that the class-viewing relationship is spurious, arising from some third confounding variable.

With respect to behaviours engaged in by preschoolers while watching television, items reflecting distractibility were found to be significantly related to socioeconomic status. Children from low socioeconomic homes were less likely to be quiet and attentive while watching TV ($r(227) = .27, p < .001$) and more likely to play with other children ($r(227) = -.28, p < .001$), with toys ($r(227) = -.29, p < .001$), and run around without watching much ($r(227) = -.35, p < .001$). In order to ensure that these relationships were not merely a function of the amount of television viewed, partial correlations were calculated controlling for this possible confounding variable. Again, a significant positive correlation was obtained between socioeconomic status and being quiet and attentive ($r(226) = .28, p < .001$), while slightly weaker yet

significant negative correlations were found between social class and playing with other children ($r(226) = -.23$, $p < .001$), with toys ($r(226) = -.24$, $p < .001$), and running around without watching much ($r(226) = -.32$, $p < .001$). Socioeconomic status did not appear to bear any notable relationship, however, to the extent to which children copy while they watch television nor to their copying or idolizing behaviour after watching TV. Social class differences were also apparent in relation to one programme type. Preschoolers from lower socioeconomic groups were less likely to mention educational programmes amongst their favourites ($\chi^2(2) = 8.54$, $p = .01$).

DISCUSSION

Using an Australia-wide sample of parents of preschool children, this study examined the television viewing patterns of young children in their *home* environment and in particular, differences in their style of interaction with the medium.

The results indicated considerable variability in the amount of television viewed with relatively higher weekly averages being recorded for boys, single children and preschoolers from lower socioeconomic groups. While the former and latter variables have been identified as correlates of high viewing (Blood, 1961; Harper, Munro, & Himmelweit, 1970; Tindall & Reid, 1975), the tendency for only children to watch more television than those with siblings is a finding which needs to be replicated. By and large, children preferred the sorts of programmes designed for their age group, for example, educational shows such as *Sesame Street*, child oriented variety shows such as *Humphrey Bear* and *the Muppets*, and cartoons. The one difference in programme preference noted was the tendency for children from the higher socioeconomic groups to mention educational programmes more often —

a finding which supports earlier research (cf. Murray, 1972). This may simply reflect differences in exposure, however. It was evident from the data that preschoolers in the higher socioeconomic groups were more likely to watch the A.B.C., and thus might be more exposed to educationally oriented shows.

Most parents acknowledged the impact of television on their child's behaviour. Just over half the respondents reported observing their child watch television while simultaneously copying the characters on the screen. When asked to consider delayed effects, 90% of parents reported copying by their child of things seen or heard on television. The copying displayed was substantially verbal (e.g., singing commercial jingles) followed by gross motor imitations (e.g. eating like *Cookie Monster*), which supports Lyle and Hoffman's (1972) data. Furthermore, almost half of the parents reported that their child idolized characters on television, particularly supernatural heroes, puppets and cartoon characters. Whether this idolizing takes the form of actual character identification or merely what Noble (1975) has termed para-social interaction is a question deserving further research. It is noteworthy that preschoolers were rarely observed idolizing female characters such as supernatural heroines. This probably reflects the fact that female characters are less likely to be portrayed in a heroic role. Indeed female characters are less likely to be portrayed in any major television role (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979).

Aside from these specific findings, the present study has highlighted the potential importance of style of viewing as a research variable, as opposed to relatively crude indices of amount viewed. The results demonstrated that while almost half the children were reported to be quiet and attentive for

most of the time they are watching TV, a significant proportion engaged in other distracting activities such as playing with toys, other children, or running around. Fluctuations in attention to television programmes have been previously demonstrated in laboratory settings (Anderson & Levin, 1976), yet researchers have to date ignored analysing this factor in more naturalistic environments. The current study found that greater distractibility was associated with lower socioeconomic status. As noted earlier, lower socioeconomic status was also found to be related to high viewing rates. When amount viewed was controlled, however, differences in viewing style were still found to be associated with social class, that is, low socioeconomic viewers were found to engage in more distracting behaviours than high socioeconomic viewers.

This finding concerning viewing style may well be important: if lower class children interact with television in a totally different style, it may be that the impact of the medium is moderated or filtered in a different manner. In other words, if these children who watch a large amount of television daily also watch in a less attentive (more distracted) fashion, a less pervasive influence may be exerted. Conversely, it may be the case that viewers who watch intermittently may be watching certain more salient sequences (e.g., a fight or chase scene) out of context. If attention is thus focused for a brief period, the depth of cognitive processing which occurs may be greater for these isolated sequences. Under such conditions, low socioeconomic viewers might indeed be more vulnerable to the influence of television.

This study sought to investigate the role of television in the lives of Australian preschoolers in their home environment. In an attempt to gain ecologically valid data from a wide cross section of the community,

reliance was placed in the responses of a participating informant, the parent. Undeniably, there are difficulties inherent in accepting parent reports of their child's behaviour. Discrepancies in estimates of children's viewing reported by children themselves and by their parents are well documented. The objectivity of parental responses has been questioned by Rossiter and Robertson (1975) on the grounds that parents may respond in a socially desirable manner. As for the validity of children's reports of their viewing times, few systematic data are as yet available: accuracy in time-telling, however, cannot be assumed in a population of preschool children. Thus, parental report appears to be the only available pragmatic strategy for collecting such information from a large sample of young viewers. The validity of this strategy will depend on the convergence of these findings with those of other researchers employing different methodologies.

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