

**TELEVISION AND FAMILY INTERACTION**  
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### INTRODUCTION

Television has long been recognized as a social factor influencing our behaviors, perceptions of world events, social values and the concept of entertainment. Ozersky (1977) argued that television has a detrimental effect on family interaction and solidarity. However, his position has not been supported in the literature with empirical documentation. This study was designed to explore the amount and type of interaction within the family. Schroeder, Fickling and Schutes (1979) sampled college students to gain a perspective on the problem. They found that most families gather around the television and converse with one another for approximately twelve minutes out of every hour. The conversation generally involved television content but not exclusively. They documented a positive correlation between hours spent watching television and attributions of family closeness.

### NATURE OF CONCERN

Television has long been recognized as a significant influence in the socialization process of society (Himmelweit, Oppenheim, Vince, 1958; McLeod & O'Keefe, 1972; Liebert, Neale, & Davidson, 1973). McDonagh (1950) concluded that the television would influence family communication patterns (socialization process), "... changing from a social group characterized by conversion to an audience . . . silently gazing". Klapper (1960) however noted that the mass media's content and influence is filtered through the family's sociological mechanisms.

McLeod, Chaffee and Eswara (1966) recognized the relationship between the mass media's influence and family interaction patterns which form the vicarious communication model on which children rely for the development of their interactive style. Ozersky (1977) wrote that television viewing dissolves social bonds and leads to a degree of alienation. "Those watching it are separated from the social body within which they ordinarily function and enter into a personal, individualized transaction with the medium" (Ozersky, 1977).

The communication model used by the

medium of television is the telephone as noted by Ozersky (1977) "... the great surprize about television is that it is not a mass medium, but an individual one". Individual family members watching television are separated from the "social body" by restricting activities in the vicinity of the television set such as card playing, reading, writing, conversing, and study.

Rosenblatt and Cunningham (1976) conclude that television viewing revealed a high degree of avoidance behavior.

The average family views television from 2 to 3 hours daily (Walling, 1976). McLeod, Chaffee, and Eswara (1966) conclude that a relationship exists, while Rosenblatt and Cunningham (1976) document avoidance behavior while viewing. It appears reasonable to conclude that society has structured social isolation. This becomes apparent from the research of Efron (1970) which statistically describes the seventeen year old child as having viewed more than 15,000 hours. For people of all ages, television viewing consumes more time than any other single activity.

Schroeder, et al (1979) documents that the greatest amount of family interaction occurred during television viewing. The average length of interaction per hour was 12 minutes distributed unequally throughout the hour. The most frequently discussed topic among family members was T.V. programming (34%), followed by school activities (27%). The least discussed topic was the feeling of individual family members.

Schroeder, et al (1979) indicated that a relationship exists between televiewing and attributed "closeness" as a family unit; however as the hours of viewing increased, the attributed "closeness" deteriorates. This finding however does not encourage disagreement with Ozersky's (1977) position that television viewing has detrimental effects on family interaction and solidarity. Because most families interact approximately 12 minutes out of every hour and 34 percent of the time the "conversation" is about the telescreen's content. However, the interaction may not merit the label "conversation".

**METHOD**

This project was concerned with family and parent perceptions of televiewing and family relations. The focus of the project was on (1) the amount and type of interaction among families while televiewing and (2) the attributions about family relations. The design called surveying parents and teenagers in a door to door canvass of a community. Cluster Sampling techniques were employed to select the sample from the entire population of a small, college community in the Southwest.

**SUBJECTS:**

Residential neighborhoods of Portales, New Mexico were sampled during the spring and summer months of 1980. Random multi-stage cluster sampling was employed in order to achieve the most cost efficient representativeness of the sample. This technique required dividing the city into clusters controlling for density within the city boundary lines. The city was divided into forty-two clusters. The clusters ranged in size from 4 blocks to 12 square blocks to control the density. Eleven randomly drawn clusters were sampled. One block was randomly picked from each cluster with nineteen households interviewed on both sides of street in each cluster (Yates, 1960: 10-18, 63-68).

Total sample size, cluster number, and the bound on the error estimate were extrapolated from the Schroeder (1979) study using the methods described in Scheaffer, Mendenhall and Ott (1979; 144). Each household in the population had a 5 percent chance of being selected. (Babbie, 1973: 100).

Before attempting the multi-stage cluster sampling, a community profile was obtained to insure the distributional qualities of our dependent variable, number of households containing a telescreen. Of a population of 3876 year-round housing units 337 households responded that they did not have at least one television set in the home (U.S. Census, 1972).

The number of households surveyed was 116. According to the calculations (based on Scheaffer, et al, 1979) two hundred and nine households should have been surveyed. However, given the environmental contingencies sampling techniques cannot always be applied pragmatically as described theoretically.

Weather, the actual shape of the city's ecological characteristics, refusals to be interviewed and other such surveying problems were encountered. It is believed that the number of households that were surveyed was large enough to yield near normally distributed characteristics for the city sampled (Lin, 1976: 117).

**MEASURE:**

A forty-one item questionnaire was constructed using as its basis the Schroeder et al (1979) instrument of measure. Six of the forty-one questions were factor analyzed (70% of variance explained; eigenvalue 2.01) and grouped accordingly into the following factor classification: (1) type of relationship family has as a unit; (2) family television viewing; (3) type of television programming selected; (4) family interaction; (5) the television message as "conversation" stimulus. One question was an open-ended response type which allowed respondents to comments on "How has television viewing effected family interaction?"

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The Pearson product-moment correlation was utilized in order to study the basic relationship among the variables (Williams, 1979; 121-125). Oneway analysis of variance techniques were employed for exploring the group differences for independent variable effects upon the dependent variables. The one-way analysis of variance allows an investigator to test for differences between group means (Dunn and Clark, 1974).

**RESULTS**

The analysis of data revealed that the average amount of time viewing television together as a family unit was 2-3 hours daily, Monday through Friday, with an average of 4-6 hours on the weekend, providing an approximated range of 14 to 21 hours of family viewing every week. Individual viewing may be higher.

In response to the question "When does your family communicate most often," the number one rank was during meals and second most often was while televiewing. In response to the question "What do you discuss most often with your family while watching t.v.," the number one response was "t.v. show content," second was "family situations" and

last was "individual problems". The average amount of time talking while viewing television was approximated at 12 minutes with a range of 5 to 15 minutes every hour of viewing.

The correlational analysis indicated a positive relationship between the amount of time talking and "t.v. show content" ( $r = .33$ ) while a negative relationship exists between talking and "individual problems", ( $r = -.23$ ).

The oneway analysis of variance indicated that the type of relationship was a function of the composite viewing time [ $F(3,99) = 3.47$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. Families viewing television together for 8 to 10 hours weekly had attributed a better relationship than families that view for shorter periods, and for longer time periods, thus the relationship was curvilinear. Further analysis indicated that the type of relationship was a function of weekend viewing time [ $F(3,98) = 2.83$ ,  $p < .04$ ]. Families viewing greater amounts of television during the weekends had a better attributed relationship than families that view for shorter periods.

The type of relationship was a function of "competing with a t.v. program to discuss a problem" [ $F(3,94) = 3.04$ ,  $p < .03$ ]. Families that indicated that they did not compete with the TV to discuss a problem had a better attributed relationship than those families which had indicated they competed.

Different types of relationships were characterized by unique communicative behaviors televiewing, however, the statistical probability did not meet the pre-established alpha of .05 [ $F(93,98) = 2.40$ ,  $p < .06$ ]. The group with the best attributed relationship avoided interaction with other family members with projects, or reading, when the telescreen was broken or removed. While the group with the "so-so" attribution would "sit, feeling uneasy". The worst attributed relationship avoided interaction by turning to an alternate electronic medium.

The amount of time talking appeared to be a function of the amount of time televiewing [ $F(3,110) = 2.59$ ,  $p < .05$ ]. The more time spent viewing together resulted in more interaction time. The likelihood to discuss individual problems with the family also appeared to be a function of family televiewing [ $F(3,102) = 3.05$ ,  $p < .03$ ]. The means for the groups portends a linear relationship. However, the analysis of variance indicated that the likelihood to discuss schoolwork, the job and other family re-

lated topics was not a function of time viewing together [ $F(3,100) = 3.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. Rather, the more time viewing resulted in a descending linear relationship.

The type of relationship was significantly influenced by the number of sets in the home [ $F(4,109) = 3.53$ ,  $p < .009$ ]. Families with multiple sets revealed a poorer attribution about the quality of the family relationship.

Weekend viewing was a function of the number of telescreens [ $F(4,110) = 2.38$ ,  $p < .05$ ]. Those families with multiple sets spent less time together televiewing. The attribution of what constituted lounging also was a function of the number of screens in the home [ $F(4,98) = 2.63$ ,  $p < .03$ ]. Televiewing in private, i.e., bedrooms, was considered "lounging" and watching with other family members was not "lounging".

Talking about individual problems in a family setting also proved to be a function of the number of sets [ $F(4,102) = 3.95$ ,  $p < .005$ ]. Families with no telescreen discussed individual problems more openly and freely than families with one set. Families with multiple sets tended to avoid discussion of personal problems. Correspondingly then, time spent viewing as a family was significantly influenced by the number of sets [ $F(3,111) = 2.93$ ,  $p < .03$ ], meaning multiple sets resulted in less family viewing.

## DISCUSSION

The results document McDonagh's (1950) observation about changed communication patterns. However, the assertions of McDonagh (1950) and Ozersky (1977) about detrimental effects on interaction and attributions of solidarity were challenged by the findings. Families that view for longer time periods attributed more positive adjectives to describe their relationship such as "close", "loving", and "supportive".

The results replicated Schroeder, et al (1979) in number of minutes interacting in an hour, topics discussed, and perceived attributions. The mention of individual problems may suggest that the concept of avoidance was present, however it appeared to have a diminishing effect over time.

The single most important variable was the amount of time viewing television together as demonstrated by the analysis of both the time

and the number of telescreens.

*Thus it was possible to conclude that the more time a family spent viewing gathered around one set, resulted in increased amounts of interaction, discussion of individual problems and the feelings of having a close, loving, and supportive family relationship.*

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