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Students with Emotional Disorders and Their Television Viewing Habits: A Case Study

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Calvin, of Calvin and Hobbes (Watterson, 1994), escapes the plight of his Mom and Dad (never named) and his teacher (also, never named) by fleeing into a vivid fantasy world of aliens, monsters, and transmorgaphying machines. When reality becomes overwhelming, Calvin jumps into his cardboard box, better known as the “Great and Wonderful Transmorgaphying Machine,” and becomes a speckle of dust that can float disconnected from his body, instead of dealing with his Mom’s insistence that he clean his room.

Fantasy and internal dialogue can be part of everyone’s experience. But, not all fantasies are adaptive or self-enhancing. Consider Beavis and Butthead (Judge, 1996), while this show provided many people with an entertaining/humorous -- albeit skewed -- glance at the world of two teenagers, how would someone (e.g., a teacher) outside the show’s constructed reality describe their behavior? And what of the adult cartoon South Park (Parker & Stone, 1999)?

The children of South Park (Parker & Stone, 1999) provide a politically driven, child's view of American society and culture; that is if the child's view was first filtered through a Kafkian Prism. South Park may seem astute to the adult viewer, but imagine having these children in a class. These television programs illustrate examples of children that could be diagnosed with an emotional disorder. Estimates of the prevalence of emotional disorders in children and youths have varied because there has been no standard and reliable definition or screening instrument (Hallahan & Kauffman 2006). Additionally, Forness, Freeman, Paparella, Kauffman, & Walker (2012), write that underidentification of emotional disorders is prevalent in school-age populations where students are identified at the one percent of the population. However, it is estimated that at least 6 to 10 percent of school-age children exhibit serious and persistent emotional problems. As Brauner & Stephens (2006) cited from a 1999 Department of Human and Health Services report, approximately 10% of children are diagnosed with an emotional disorder in some period of their life. One area of concern has been if a connection exists between the behavior of school-age children with emotional problems and their consumption of entertainment media.

We investigated whether there is a relationship between the behavior of children with an emotional disorder and their consumption of entertainment media (i.e., television). This study attempted to emphasize that a connection between media consumption and the challenging inappropriate behavior of children with emotional disorders is an artifact of previous research. Mitronfan, Paul, & Spenser (2009) write that their systematic review found insufficient, contradictory and methodologically flawed evidence on the association between television viewing and aggression in young people with emotional disorders. The study used qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, observations) to critically examine and deconstruct the *prima fascia* stance of media effect theories as they apply to children/youths with emotional disorders consumption of traditional entertainment media.

The participants for this study are from an elementary campus of a school district in East Texas. The students and their teacher are interviewed in the natural setting of their classroom. Six student participants

were chosen based on the campus administrator's verification of identification of students as having qualified to receive special education services as a child with an emotional disorder. After receiving approval from the parents, the campus administrator submitted a list of at least six students – who met the criteria of the study and whose parents/legal guardians were willing to allow them to participate.

A History Violence

Violence and antisocial behavior has been a subject in literature, and the arts since the beginning of human civilization examples include but not limited to *The Odyssey* written by Homer in 800 B.C.E. (Homer & Wilson 2018), Cain killing Abel in the Bible (Genesis 4:1–16 Old Testament), and *The Divine Comedy* completed in 1320 A.D. (Alighieri, 2018). In part, this may merely reflect the unfortunate realities of civilization. But, it is also likely that people's fascination with violence satisfies some basic human needs. The adrenalin rush, the satisfaction of imagination, fantasy, and vicarious adventure, probably explains why millions of nonviolent people enjoy violent entertainment (Bettelheim, 1976; Jones, 2002). Enjoyment is typically examined during or after viewing. However, selective exposure and satisfaction are the different process and not strongly predictive of happiness in specific contexts (Weaver, 2011).

Gauntlett (2004) writes that despite many decades of research, the connection between traditional entertainment media (e.g., print, radio, and analog television) consumption by children and children's challenging behavior has remained persistently elusive. Somewhere between 200 and 300 laboratory experiments and correlational studies have been done on media effects and the results have been dubious and inconsistent (Sprafkin, Gadow, & Grayson 1987; Gadow & Sprafkin, 1989; Gauntlett, 1996). One experiment found aggressive and antisocial behavior, in children, after they viewed *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* (Jones, 2002).

According to Fischhoff (1999) and Goldstein (2001), for the minority of quantitative experiments that have yielded a correlation between antisocial behavior and media consumption by children, the explanation probably has more to do with the general arousal effect of violent entertainment than with viewers' exact imitation of violent acts.

Laboratory-based experiments do not measure real aggression (Gauntlett, 1996) instead these studies measure other behaviors that the researchers consider proxies for real aggression (Freedman, 2002). Fischhoff (1999) indicates that the evidence for the connection between media consumption and antisocial behavior is very controvertible. Fischhoff believes, as does other researchers (e.g., Sprafkin et al., 1987; Goldstein, 2001; Gauntlett, 2004; Jones, 2002), that the use of a quantitative research design when examining the effects of media on children, is flawed, and that it is more appropriate to use qualitative methodologies, especially when investigating something as nebulous as motivation and intent.

Consumption of entertainment media vs. The behavior of children

The current study investigated whether there is a relationship between the behavior of children with an emotional disorder and their consumption of entertainment media (i.e., television). The study used qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, observations) to critically examine and deconstruct the *prima facie* stance of media effect theories as they apply to children/youth's consumption of traditional entertainment media.

Paradigms and Procedures

The participants for this study are from an elementary campus of a school district in East Texas. The students and teacher interviewed in the natural setting of their classroom. Study participants are from the population of one elementary class. Six student participants were chosen based on the campus administrator's verification of identification of students. After receiving approval from the parents, the campus administrator submitted a list to the investigator of at least six students – who met the criteria of the study and whose parents/legal guardians were willing to allow them to participate. Numerous classroom observations, student and teacher participant interviews', and an extensive review of past and current literature re-examined children and media effects form a qualitative standpoint.

We spent one week at an elementary school in East Texas interviewing the six student-participants, their teacher, and observing the student-, and teacher-participants in their natural environment of the classroom. The students' favorite television programs were digitally recorded and followed by the

investigator. This procedure was done to compare the observable, classroom behaviors of the students to the observable behaviors of the television characters. Interviews with all participants were transcribed to allow for easier access to the acquired data. The information from this study was analyzed by applying techniques of data display and analysis.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis was approached using respected, researcher-accepted practices, including (a) recording of the data in minute detail, (b) open-ended questions presented to this study's participants, (c) researcher observations of both the participants and the traditional entertainment media, and (d) data analysis using a deconstruction approach (Gauntlett, 1996; 2004; Merriam, 2016). Data examined for its influences on culture, social, education, or economic biases of the students' teachers. The final analysis was presented in visual (e.g., graphs, tables) and narrative form with transcriptions of the interviews.

Line by line analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted, extrapolating information related to television programs viewed, attitudes towards said programs, and influences said programs had on participants. The extrapolated information was then categorized, according to the genre of programs and participants responses related to watching programs. Tables 1-3 were then created using the above criteria. Data was used to determine answers to the research questions. Data were analyzed *via* traditional, hand-coding. The uniqueness of this study, the need to extrapolate seemingly unrelated data, and the data-set size were all considered as factors that suggested the use of traditional, non-qualitative software-based methods. The first letter of their name identified students.

Analysis of Results

After the investigative week at the elementary school in East Texas, certain commonalities discovered among the majority of participants related to their viewing of traditional entertainment media. These commonalities included: (a) that the participants viewed shows that were contradictory to their behaviors, (b) that the shows viewed were not antisocial in message or intent, (c) that the student participants all stated a need for "something" in their lives that was not chaotic. The following are data gathered through interviews and observations of participants and television programs:

See Table 1

See Table 2

See Table 3

According to Douglas and Olshaker (1999), there have been instances where criminals or others engaged in violent behavior have imitated specific aspects of violent television shows. As noted earlier some researchers (e.g., Bandura, 1977; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan 2002) conclude that children process television shows by imitating what they view. The above researchers' hypothesis is not conclusive (Gauntlett, 1996; Jones 2002). The student-participants' interviews and observable, negative classroom behaviors (see Table 3) illustrate a dichotomy between actions and views.

All student-participants identified as having an emotional disorder according to the United States federal definition in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004):

“emotional disturbance means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance: (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual sensory, or health factors; (B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; (C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; (D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; (E) a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.”

A majority of students (5 out of 6) stated that they preferred watching television programs that coincidentally have an MPAA Rating of TVG to TVY. Student-participants indicated that they liked television shows that IMDB.com (2015) and Parker and Stone (2015) describe as family-friendly, positive shows. Conversely, they (i.e., the student-participants) were observed engaging in such harmful behaviors as pulling chairs out from under other students or flooding the restroom with water (see Table 3). The two students W and S; that pulled chairs out from under other students laughed when the students who fell

cried. This included student P, who stated (that) while his favorite program was *Fear Factor*, he also watched *VeggieTales* because “. . . They help me learn about God." When asked how watching their favorite television programs made them feel, the student-participants responded that it made them feel good or happy. This seems to support their earlier statements that they wanted something that was positive (i.e., commonality C).

The students' responses to the interview questions support the position that they were using television as a form of escapism. When asked why they liked a particular show, the students responded that they wanted, needed, or should have some normalcy in their lives. *Fear Factor* which was watched by Student P -- while it is intended for older audiences -- still has elements of characters supporting and helping each other and overcoming their fears. Therefore, we discovered these six children utilizing television as a pseudo-copping mechanism.

While the students come from different backgrounds, one constant is that all of their families are dealing with some chaos. No common observable behavior patterns could be found in student-participants that mirrored those maladaptive behaviors in the characters which they viewed. If a connection exists between these specific students' behavior and their viewing of traditional entertainment media, it would seem to be at a more profound, unobservable level.

By observing the behaviors of the student participants in their classroom environment, it could not be determined if the students knew they were engaging in antisocial behavior. Anecdotal evidence was observed that the students appeared to get upset when they talked about their family life. One student stated that she did not want to talk about her mother. Another student got very agitated with the subject of her family. A few times it was observed in the classroom, students that were not participants in this study would say derogatory comments (e.g., "your mom is a crack-whore") to student-participants. This would cause the students to either "yell" back or leave the classroom.

When the student-participants' teacher was interviewed, she stated that she believed television negatively affected the behavior of her students. When questioned further, she was unable to give specific examples of this occurring. She said that media violence has been pervasive in the news and, because of that reason, it was likely the media would have an effect on her students. This belief may be a function of Gebner et al., (2002) cultivation theory. Wherein, people that view media may come to perceive their environment more regarding what is televised, rather than actual reality. The teacher also stated that television could have positive effects on children because it exposes them to "things" that they may not otherwise be aware. She gave the example of *Forensic Files*, which is a documentary about crime scene investigations.

It has been suggested by Kubey (1986) and Rubin (1984) that the most prominent approach of explaining the causes of television viewing involves escapism. According to Rubin, "In its core, escapism means that most people have, due to unsatisfying life circumstances, again and again, cause to leave the reality in which they live cognitively and emotionally" (p. 69). In addition to one's social situation, there is also a psychological situation that is largely independent of social influences and can trigger an escapist manner of television viewing. For example, one study identified ten uses/gratifications for social media, including: (a) social interaction (88%), (b) information seeking (80%), (c) pass time (76%), (d) entertainment (64%), (e) relaxation (60%), (f) communicatory utility (52%), (g) information sharing (40%), and surveillance & watching of others (20%) (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

Kubey (1986) hypothesizes (that) it has been made clear traditional entertainment media is an activity likely to be chosen by people wishing to escape from negative feelings and the demands of reality. Kubey also writes the form of escapism is referred to as social-psychological escapism. This is when escapism concerns the close social (e.g., family) setting of the person. Although this conceptualization of escapism seems plausible, empirical (i.e., quantitative) studies have shown weak results (Gauntlett, 1996). According to Jones (2002) and Kubey (1986), social-psychological escapism has been identified in mass communication research since the early 1940s. By examining the data collected from this study, it seems probable that the student-participants may be using social-psychological escapism as a way of dealing with the day-to-day realities of their lives.

Conclusion

It was found that the students spent only a small part of their days watching television, anywhere from one to two hours per day. While the quality of the programming watched is more important than the time spent viewing, the student-participants were watching age-appropriate programming that teaches positive social messages. The Canadian Paediatric Society wrote in (2017) that quality content of media could enhance both social and language skills for all children aged 2 and older, particularly for children living in poverty. For this study, it would seem that while the appropriateness of the television shows that children are watching does not bely all of the criticisms (e.g., increased distractibility). Even Bryant (2001), who is concerned with the viewing habits of television watchers, has worked on and approves of positive, shows such as *Sesame Street* (Berger, 2004).

Even though the students have differing backgrounds, one constant is that student' families were dealing with some typed of chaos. While the investigator observed the behaviors of the characters and student-participants, no common observable behavior patterns could be found. Based on observations and interviews, a connection between the students' interpretation of behaviors of the characters and the students' challenging behavior could not be found, no correlation. To delve further into the behaviors of the participants and their denial that they used traditional entertainment media to create meaning goes beyond the scope of this study. The students were unable to see results between individual student behavior and viewing. If a connection exists between these specific students' behavior and their viewing to traditional entertainment media, it would seem to be at a more in-depth, unobservable level.

This study examined six, first-grade exceptional students and their viewing habits. Numerous classroom observations, student and teacher participant interviews', and an extensive review of past and current literature should provide starting points for re-examining children and media effects from a qualitative standpoint. By examining television from the emic voice of the children, without placing them (i.e., the children) in a Marxist ordinate/subordinate position to the researcher, we believe that a better understanding of media effects can be delineated.

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Table 1: Descriptors of Student- and Teacher-participants' Favorite Television Programs

Television Programs	Participants (Initials)	Genre of Programs	Channel	Programs
<i>Fear Factor</i>	P	Reality	NBC	
<i>Forensic Files</i>	Teacher	Crime/Documentary	Court TV	
<i>Kim Possible</i>	D, S	Cartoon	Disney Channel	
<i>Lilo & Stitch</i>	W	Cartoon	Disney Channel	
<i>Lizzie McGuire</i>	W	Children's show	Disney Channel	
<i>The Proud Family</i>	D	Cartoon	Disney Channel	
<i>Sister, Sister</i>	S	Family situation comedy	ABC	
<i>Scooby-Doo, Where are You?</i>	A	Cartoon	Cartoon Network	
<i>SpongeBob SquarePants</i>	B, D	Cartoon	Nickelodeon	
<i>Tom and Jerry</i>	B	Cartoon	Cartoon Network	
<i>VeggieTales</i>	P	Religious Cartoon	Videos*	

Note. Even though *VeggieTales* is not a television program, it is included in this study because it is viewed on the television using a VHS or DVD player

Table 2: Motion Picture Association of America Rating of Television Programs

Television Programs	MPAA Ratings of Television Programs
<i>Fear Factor</i>	Unrated
<i>Forensic Files</i>	Unrated
<i>Kim Possible</i>	TVY7
<i>Lilo & Stitch</i>	TVY
<i>Lizzie McGuire</i>	TVY
<i>The Proud Family</i>	TVY
<i>Sister, Sister</i>	TVG
<i>Scooby-Doo, Where are You?</i>	Unrated
<i>SpongeBob SquarePants</i>	TVY
<i>Tom and Jerry</i>	Unrated
<i>VeggieTales</i>	Unrated

Table 3: Researcher Observed Negative Classroom Behaviors of Student-Participants

Students' Initials	Verbal abuse against other students	Hitting other students	Pulling Chairs of other students	Damaging property	Leaving classroom w/o permission
W	40 times	4 times	2 times	4 times	5 times
P	26 times	6 times	0	0	15 times
B	14 times	2 times	0	0	4 times
D	50 times	10 times	0	0	2 times
S	21 times	6 times	1 time	1 time	6 times
A	4 times	0	0	0	26 times