Violence perception as a function of entertainment value and TV violence*

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This study explored the relationship between children's violence perception and their previous exposure to television. Fifth- and sixth-grade children were exposed to one of four television programs: violent pleasing, violent less pleasing, nonviolent pleasing, nonviolent less pleasing. After exposure, all children were brought together to describe violent and nonviolent slides, flashed simultaneously in pairs on a screen. Results showed that only the main effect of entertainment value was significant. As opposed to a familiarity, perceptual defense, or catharsis explanation, this finding supports a satisfaction interpretation concerning the influence of television on violence perception.

Most controlled studies concerning the relationship between televised violence and real violence have employed independent variables derived from the general study of aggression. This approach neglects the analysis of independent variables derived from the general study of television and other communication arts.

Another omission of earlier TV violence research is the study of intervening perceptual processes. Toch (1969) states that the probability of violence in a given situation is positively tied to the extent to which the individuals involved are predisposed to perceive violence. Toch and his associates (Toch & Schulte, 1961; Shelley & Toch, 1962) developed a procedure which measures predispositions to perceive violence. Pairs of violent and nonviolent stereographs are presented to Ss with a stereoscopic tachistoscope. Propensity to perceive violence is determined by the number of violent percepts reported by Ss.

A prior study (Rabinovitch, MacLean, Markham, & Talbott, 1971) adopted Toch's technique to study the influence of televised violence on children's everyday perceptions. Like the majority of TV violence studies, the main independent variable was the presence or absence of violent TV content. On the basis of the familiarity argument (Engel, 1956; Toch & Schulte, 1961), the violent program group should have reported more violent percepts. But stereoscopic measurement of violence perception

immediately after TV exposure revealed least propensity to perceive violence in the violent program group.

A preferred explanation, the satisfaction view, is based on the importance of entertainment value in most television-related behavior. National surveys (Steiner, 1963; Lo Sciuto, 1971) continue to show that most audience members feel that audience entertainment is the main function of television. A program has entertainment value to the degree that audience members obtain satisfaction of a desire for optimal arousal. This satisfaction relates to aggression in that frustration, the antecedent condition for aggression, depends on the gap between expected and actual need satisfaction. When actual need satisfaction is increased by means of exposure to an entertaining television show, frustration will be lessened and aggression-related behavior, such as violence perception, should also decrease.

Television programs which depict violence are of particular concern in satisfying audience members. Violent content is presumed to have an advantage in entertainment value over many other types of content. One reason for this advantage is that violence is an extreme form of conflict and conflict is an acknowledged ingredient (Eisenstein, 1949; Willis, 1967; Berlyne, 1960) in mass media presentations of high entertainment and aesthetic value. However, any television presentation which has a high degree of entertainment value should lessen aggressive tendencies.

Two other alternate positions are perceptual defense, which was first considered as an alternate violence perception explanation by Toch & Schulte (1961), and catharsis (Feshbach, 1961, 1969). Both these arguments give the influence of violent content a preeminent position in the

television-violence relationship. According to the perceptual defense position, inhibition represses the perception of a socially disapproved action such as violence. According to the catharsis position, vicarious violent experiences help to satisfy aggressive tendencies.

To compare the alternate positions to the satisfaction argument, a factorial design was created with an entertainment value variable added to the usual violent content variable. Only the satisfaction position anticipates a main effect of entertainment value. According to the satisfaction formulation, any kind of aesthetically pleasing or entertaining presentation, including a pleasing violent presentation, will lessen violence perception. According to all other positions previously cited, violence perception will be influenced only by changes in violent content.

METHOD

Fifth- and sixth-grade children of the Simi Valley Unified School District who obtained parental permission participated as Ss in the study. There were 32 females and 21 males. The day before the experiment, children whose parental permission had been obtained were divided into girls and boys and assigned to one of four groups by consulting a table of random numbers. On the morning of the study, children went to their classrooms as usual. Teachers were given five lists of children. They sent the children either to one of the four television rooms or to a fifth room for children whose parental permission had not been obtained. This division created three television groups of 13 children each and one television group of 14 children.

When the children arrived in one of the television rooms, they found a video tape recorder with a monitor equivalent to the average portable television set. They were greeted, seated, and asked to watch the TV program. Each group saw one television program.

The mass media presentations used were television programs recorded in February 1972 from regular Los Angeles broadcasts. Episodes of *Adam 12* and *Monty Nash* were chosen as the violent programs. Episodes of *Bewitched* and *Family Affair* were chosen as the nonviolent shows. There was a lack of any violent content in both *Bewitched* and *Family Affair*. There were violent incidents in *Monty Nash* and *Adam 12*. Specifically, *Monty Nash* included a physical beating of Nash by three marines, a reprisal by Nash, and an exchange of rifle fire. *Adam 12* included a bank robbery, a frisking, a bomb threat, a chase, and the beating of the bank

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Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of the Children's Violence Descriptions as a
Function of Entertainment Value and Violent Content

	Violent		Nonviolent	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Pleasing	9.31	7.34	13.64	8.48
Not as Pleasing	16.77	7.68	16.54	9.84

robber by a reserve officer. Gerbner's (1971) content analysis of 1967-69 TV programs supports the foregoing violence division. Because *Monty Nash* was introduced in 1971, it was not included in Gerbner's analysis. *Adam 12* and *Bewitched* were chosen as the entertaining presentations after interviewing several elementary school children. A median test of the subsequent program ratings by the present Ss ($\chi^2 = 13.16$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$) supports this division.

After viewing the TV presentations, children rated the programs according to their feelings of pleasure on an 8-point scale. The children were then told not to communicate with any of their fellow students and were escorted to the cafeteria. As they arrived, they were evenly distributed to ensure no bias in location for any particular sex or group. Once all children were seated, each child was given a pair of polarizing glasses. After a short introduction to the violence perception measurement technique, slides were flashed on a screen and the Ss freely described what they saw.

More specifically, a Mariette stereoscopic projection tachistoscope with two slide projectors was used to present 20 slide presentations. One slide projector projected a violent slide while the other was simultaneously presenting a nonviolent slide. The projector lenses were covered by polarizing filters set at 90 deg to each other. Polaroid filters fitted in this manner caused the violent slide to be projected with light waves of different dimensions than the nonviolent slide. Os, the children, wore Polaroid glasses with lenses set at similar angles. During projection, two images, one violent, one nonviolent, were projected on a silver screen at the same time. Both violent and nonviolent images were concurrently present on the screen. If Os had not worn special glasses or if a beaded screen had been used, each eye would have received two images. However, because of the polarizing filters, only one image reached each eye. A timer activated electronic shutters in front of each projector lens. Concurrent exposure of the projectors was set at .5 sec. At this short time interval, an individual could only perceive one of the two images.

Violent and nonviolent color slides were used in the violence perception

measurement. Violent activity was structured to conform to the following definition: any situation in which fighting occurs or where one or both of the individuals attempt to hurt or injure the other or each other by physical means. The violent slides met this definition. Nonviolent slides were devoid of violent content. Slides of similar content were validated in a previous study (Rabinovitch et al, 1971). When those slides were presented to children for a relatively long time, 30 sec, there was extremely high agreement that the slides labeled violent and nonviolent by the E were perceived similarly by children. The only difference in the present slides was that the humans occupied a larger portion of the image compared to the background. This change was made to insure that it would not be physically more difficult to see the violent content. As a result, the mean number of violent percepts was expected to be larger than in the previous study.

In addition to the meeting, the criteria of valid classification and ease of physical recognition, the slides were structurally matched in pairs of violent and nonviolent. They were matched structurally in that the two males photographed occupied the same space and location in the visual field in each slide. The background ingredients, including the presence of any weapon, were also held constant in slide pairs. Slide pairs differed only in the category of social interaction.

The Ss were asked to write a short description of each slide-pair presentation. They were encouraged to be candid and told that their responses would be anonymous. Ss saw 10 pairs of slides twice. In the second presentation, the slides were put in a new random order and interchanged in the projectors. This second sequence was used to rule out the effects of eye dominance. After the 20 presentations, each slide was exposed to each eye once.

Analysis of the free responses to the slide pairs consisted of scoring the written descriptions Os made of each slide. A description was given 2 points if it was clearly violent, e.g., "Two men fighting." A description was given 1 point if the violent slide was described, but not in positively violent terms. Very few descriptions were ambiguous enough to receive 1 point.

A description was given 0 points if the description was nonviolent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Means and standard deviations of the number of violent percepts for groups receiving different mass media presentations are given in Table 1. An analysis of variance of these violence perception scores, using the method of unweighted means, revealed that only the main effect of entertainment value was significant ($F = 4.51$, $df = 1/45$, $p < .05$). The main effects of violent content and all first-order interactions were not significant variables (all F s < 1.0). However, there was some indication of a more complex relationship, as the second-order interaction between sex, entertainment value, and violent content had an $F > 3$. The main effect of sex was also approaching significance. Owing to the small N, the trends indicated in the table are also worth considering. While both entertaining programs produced lower violence perception scores than the less entertaining programs, the entertaining-violent exposure produced the lowest scores.

Past laboratory studies of mass media violence, summarized by Straus & Poulos (1971), have not consciously controlled the entertainment value of their mass media presentations. Still, the similarity of the presentations within some of these studies suggests that, in some instances, entertainment value was held constant. In those studies where this was the case, the result of the present study does not support their finding of increased aggression after exposure to mass-mediated violence. However, the present study is limited to perceptual reactions immediately after TV exposure. The other studies measured physical behavior, in some cases after the passage of more than a few hours. With the perception limitation in mind, the present study supports a satisfaction explanation of the catharsis experiments (Feshbach, 1961, 1969). Liebert, Sobol, & Davidson (1971) interpreted Feshbach's research by using a version of the satisfaction explanation.

In conclusion, the present findings support the satisfaction position offered earlier. Violent content is one of many kinds of content which can please audience members and consequently lessen frustration and violence perception. The findings do not support the perceptual defense, familiarity, or catharsis views of TV violence and violence perception.

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