

**VIEWER PERCEPTIONS OF TELEVISION  
VIOLENCE AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS**

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**MARK TODD GUNTER**

Viewer Perceptions of Television Violence  
Among College Students

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An Abstract  
Presented to the  
Graduate and Research Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Mark Todd Gunter  
August 1993



## ABSTRACT

The major purpose of this study was to determine to what extent television viewers perceive the abundant amounts of violence in television programming. This study was also concerned with the possibility that realistic or explicit violence desensitizes viewers to less obvious or implicit violence. Videotaped segments of television programs were shown to ten college classes with an average size of 21 students. Upon completion of the video presentation, the subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire. Data were analyzed in terms of frequencies and t-tests for independent and paired samples. Results suggested that programs which contained explicit violence desensitized viewers to the segments that contained implicit violence.

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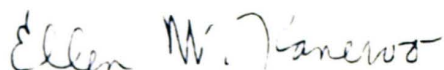
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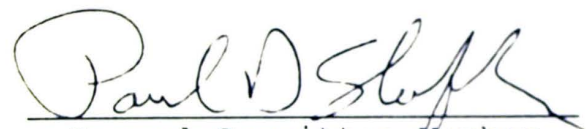
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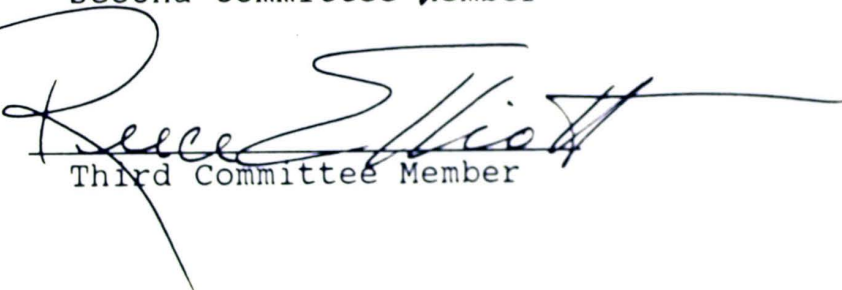


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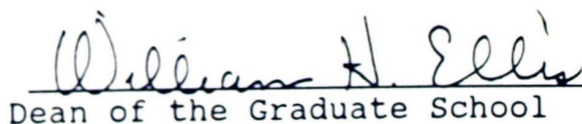


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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Media violence has been an important topic of research during the last three decades. Researchers have been especially active in investigating its potential for stimulating viewer aggression and fear of victimization. For example, some research, such as that done by Freedman (1984), has reviewed the effects of television violence on consequent aggressiveness and found mixed results which failed to prove the relationship exists. Other studies, such as Andison (1977) and Cook, Kendzierski, and Thomas (1983), found only a weak positive relationship between television violence and successive viewer aggression which still falls short of proving absolute effects exist.

The correlation between television violence and fear of victimization also has been studied in substantial depth. Most of the research in this area has been based on George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory. Gerbner went into great detail examining this relationship in a series of violence profile studies (Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, and Signorielli, 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1980). Doob and Macdonald (1979) found Gerbner's basic findings to be replicable until attempts were made to control for the actual incidence of crime in the subjects' neighborhoods. Loye, Gorney, and

Steel (1977) reviewed an experiment on the effects of television on behavior patterns. A correlation was found between viewing violence and hurtful behaviors but not between viewing prosocial behaviors and helpful behaviors.

This study investigates viewer perceptions of television violence to test the possibility that viewers do not perceive the violent acts that they are exposed to every day while watching television as violence. The belief that there are two primary causes for such a lack of perception among viewers to television violence was the basis for this research. First, the creators of television programs use a variety of techniques, such as humor and fantasy, to mask the violence in their programs. Such techniques mislead viewers into assuming that, if the material is humorous or unrealistic, then it can't be violent. Neither the characters nor the situation is real or serious; therefore the seemingly violent acts are not really violent. This research postulates that the second principal reason viewers do not perceive the amount of violence in television is due to the desensitization that occurs from watching explicitly violent programs.

Television audiences are exposed to numerous programs that display explicit violence that desensitizes the viewer to the abundant amounts of implicit violence found in many shows. Discovering if and to what extent there is a lack of perception among viewers to television violence was the



primary objective of this study.

Violence takes numerous forms and has not been completely defined in some previous research. Gerbner et al. (1980) defined violence as:

. . . the overt expression of physical force (with or without a weapon, against self or others) compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed or threatened to be so victimized as part of the plot. Idle threats, verbal abuse, or gestures without credible violent consequences are not coded as violence. However, 'accidental' and natural violence (always purposeful dramatic actions to victimize certain characters) are, of course, included. (p. 11)

The authors (Gerbner et al., 1980) of that article also said for the purpose of their analysis "a violent act that fits the definition is recorded, whatever the context. The definition includes violence that occurs in fantasy or 'humorous' context as well as presented in a realistic or 'serious' context" (p. 12).

For the purpose of this research, a violent act was considered to have occurred anytime a person intentionally inflicted bodily harm on another person or on himself. The researcher acknowledged verbal threats to be acts of violence but did not utilize such acts for the purpose of this research. Violent acts that were made in humorous, fantasy, and serious contexts were employed. Only violence

from fictional programming including cartoons was used. Violence that occurred during sporting events was also excluded for the purpose of this study.

The definition of violence for the following research was supported by the types of actions that were used as stimuli in the study performed by Geen (1981). His analysis included two six minute clips of violent actions: one showing four separate shootings by a criminal and his police pursuer intertwined with shots of a high speed automobile chase and the other involving members of one athletic team attacking one member of a competing team during a contest and beating the member into unconsciousness.

This study is based on two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that viewers are more likely to recognize the violence in programs that display explicit violence than in programs that contain implicit violence. Implicit violence is considered to be violence that is concealed to the viewer by such means as humor, animation, or words describing the action covering up the actual action.

Explicit violence refers to realistic violence or violent acts where no actions have been taken to mask the violence. For example, if two identical acts of violence were shown to an audience, with one of the violent acts shown in a realistic or serious context and the other in a humorous situation, this researcher speculated that the

viewers would see the violent act in the realistic context as more violent than the violent act in the humorous situation.

The second hypothesis is that the order in which the programs are viewed will affect the level of desensitization to violence that occurs. If a program that is explicitly violent is viewed first, this research posits the viewer will experience a greater level of desensitization to the program that presents implicit violence than if the programs are viewed in the reverse order.

If viewing explicitly violent television programs does desensitize viewers' awareness to the violence in less obviously violent programs and viewers are misled by the techniques used to cover up violence, then two opposing conclusions could be drawn as to the effects this violence has on its viewers. The first assumption that could be made is that if viewers do not perceive the violence they are exposed to as violence, then they can not be affected by it. The alternative premises would be that individuals may be affected by the violence without realizing it. If the latter is the case, future research dealing with subconscious effects of the media is critical.

The theory that the lack of perception believed to occur while audiences are viewing violent programs is partially responsible for the lack of conclusive results



gained from previous studies was the rationale for this research. Before lack of perception can be considered for future research on the various effects television violence has on its viewers, we must first investigate the degree to which viewers are aware of the tremendous amounts of violence they are exposed to via television programming.

Providing evidence that viewers have a considerable lack of awareness of television violence was the primary goal of this research. If conclusive evidence is produced to support the theory that society does not perceive the abundant amounts of violence that it is exposed to every day while watching television as actual violence, then another question must be asked. Are people affected by programs containing violent acts if they do not perceive the acts as being violent? If such a lack of perception is found to exist, then researchers subsequently studying the relationships between television violence and its viewers should consider the level of perception among subjects to the projected violence a key variable to be monitored.

The method used to investigate the level of viewer perception to television violence will be discussed in Chapter 3. Before addressing the methodology of this study, it is necessary to further examine some of the previous research in this area. Chapter 2 will review some of the past research concerning the effects of violent television material on its audiences.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of Related Literature

Much research has been devoted to television violence and the various effects it has on its viewers. Some of these studies have found evidence that suggests viewers have been desensitized to much of the violence in television. This desensitization has created a lack of awareness to the vast amounts of violence among viewers. Thomas, Horton, Lippincott, and Drabman (1977) used two separate experiments to test their hypothesis that exposure to violence in the context of television drama decreased emotional responsiveness to portrayals of real life aggression. The results of the experiments support the argument that repeated observation of violent acts in dramatic television programs can result in the dulling of emotional sensitivity to similar aggressive actions. "Both children and adults were found to be less emotionally responsive to films depicting real-life aggression after watching a violent crime drama than were subjects who had seen a neutral film" (p. 457).

Researchers also have studied physiological effects of television on its viewers. Geen (1981) found that exposure to prior violence decreased sensitivity to subsequent violence and that aggressive behavior in reaction to the

latter would increase or decrease depending on whether the violence was regarded as justified or nonjustified. The level of sensitivity and the increase or decrease in aggressive behavior was measured by the change in mean arterial pressure (MAP). MAP is derived from a combination of systolic and diastolic blood pressure. Subjects in this study who had previously observed a videotape of intense violence were affected less than subjects who had observed a less violent videotape when shown subsequent aggressive acts. Geen concluded that observation of an initial violent sequence produces a desensitization to aggressive acts presented later on.

Previous research has found some evidence to support the idea that people are not affected by violent programming that they do not perceive as violence. Hartnagle, Teevan, and McIntyre (1975) hypothesized that people who perceive television programming as violent and/or perceive the violence as an effective means to obtaining a goal engage in more violent behavior than those who do not perceive television programming in these terms. The researchers distributed questionnaires to junior and senior high school students who were asked to list their favorite television shows. Attention was focused on favorite shows because these programs may be watched more closely. Favorite programs were the ones that subjects tried to watch every time they were on the air.



Violent behavior was measured by responses to questions, such as how often subjects hurt someone badly enough to need bandages. The findings from this study (Hartnagle et al., 1975) suggested that people who perceived television programming as violent and/or perceived the violence as an effective means to obtaining a goal engaged in more violent behavior than those who did not perceive television programming in those terms. Respondents who perceived their favorite programs as violent engaged in significantly more violent behavior than respondents who did not perceive their favorite programs as violent.

Katz (1991) pointed out that the National Association for the Education of Young Children recently adopted a Position Statement on Media Violence in Children's Lives that found children aged four to six were especially vulnerable to media violence because they had not fully learned to distinguish fantasy from reality. The quick recoveries of cartoon characters who were victims of violent acts gave children an unrealistic view of the injuries sustained.

Previous research also has found that television news exposure had an impact on children's perceptions of the levels of violence where they live. Cairns (1990) assessed the impact that television news exposure had on children's perceptions of the level of violence in their

neighborhoods. Actual levels of violence functioned as a control variable. Television news may have heightened the perception of social reality among these children in Northern Ireland. The results suggested that exposure to the television news appeared to influence at least some children's perceptions of violence in their neighborhoods. Most children who watched the news were fairly accurate at judging the levels of violence where they lived. In fact, the people who reported watching the news most frequently were those who were best informed. Cairns (1990) warned that caution must be taken when asserting that television news viewing causes rather than results from more accurate perceptions of levels of violence.

Results from studies conducted to validate the social learning theory and the cultivation theory have not been conclusive. Some studies found no relationship to exist, some found a weak to moderate relationship to exist, and still others found mixed results within the same study.

Extensive research has been devoted to one element of the social learning theory which was based on the idea that we learn our behaviors from what we see on television. For example, watching violent programs could inadvertently teach viewers to be more aggressive.

Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, and Walder (1972) hypothesized that young adults' aggressiveness is directly related to their preference for violent television when

they were eight or nine years old, and this preference for violent programs during this critical period is one reason for their aggressiveness. These researchers (Eron et al., 1972) performed a follow-up study on 427 teenagers of an original 875 who had previously participated in a study of third grade children. The 427 subjects were those of the original group who could be located and interviewed 10 years later. The two variables that were examined in this study were peer-rated aggression and preference for violent television programs. The results of their study found that children or adolescents who were perceived as the most aggressive were the ones who preferred violent television shows. A long term effect was found only in males. The boys who preferred violent shows in the third grade were still seen as aggressive by their peers 10 years later. The relation between early television habits and later aggression also prevailed in self-ratings of aggression.

Wood, Wong, and Chachere (1991) reviewed 28 experiments examining children's and adolescents' spontaneous aggression during unconstrained social interaction and found exposure to media violence increased viewer aggression. The authors noted that "exposure to media violence may have a small to moderate effect on a single behavior, but cumulated across multiple exposures and multiple social interactions the impact may be substantial"



(p. 378). Andison (1977) concluded that according to the findings of the studies he collected there is at least a weak positive relationship between watching violence on television and the consequent aggression demonstrated by viewers of that violence. Overall, Andison (1977) found that television can stimulate aggression in individuals within society.

The majority of research on the relationship between television violence and viewer aggression including all of the previous cited studies found only weak support for the television/aggression relationship. Most of the researchers attribute this weak, or nonexistent, support to the uncontrollable extenuating variables. Cook et al. (1983) found that the evidence from the National Institute of Mental Health Report indicates that a small association can regularly be found between violence on television and later aggression when individual differences in aggression are controlled at one time. "Consequently, proof of causation is never possible, and judgments on this issue always have to be made" (p. 192). The authors (Cook et al., 1983) asserted, however, that if forced to render a judgment on the relationship of viewing television violence and later aggression, they would probably say the association is causal. Freedman (1984) reached two conclusions when studying the adverse effects of viewing television violence on subsequent aggressiveness. "First,



there is a consistent, small positive correlation between viewing television violence and aggressiveness; second, there is little convincing evidence that in natural settings viewing television violence causes people to be more aggressive" (p. 227). He found the field studies provided mixed and unimpressive results. There were few findings that might provide the basis for an argument in favor of causality, but these findings do not replicate. Pattison (1988) argued, "what critics really object to in TV programming is not its violence but its popularity" (p. 142).

The cultivation theory, which promotes the idea that people who watch an abundant amount of violent programs have a greater fear of victimization than people who watch less violent programs, also has been researched thoroughly. The father of the cultivation theory, George Gerbner, performed most of his research on this theory in a series of violence profiles. Gerbner et al. (1978) found mistrust to be one of the most important aspects to the violence profile of perceived danger. Heavy viewers of television violence often believe that most people just look out for themselves, take advantage of others, and cannot be trusted.

Gerbner et al. (1980) suggested television is the central and most persuasive mass medium in American culture. Television's images cultivate the dominant

tendencies of our culture's beliefs, ideologies, and world views, they argue. These researchers have found that the amount of television exposure is an important indicator of the strengths of its contributions to ways of thinking and acting. "For heavy viewers, television virtually monopolizes and subsumes other sources of information, ideas and consciousness" (p. 14). This relative commonality of outlooks that television tends to cultivate in heavy viewers is referred to as mainstreaming.

Sparks and Ogles (1990) argued that a distinction between fear of victimization and probability estimates of victimization is necessary to study the relationship. Fear of victimization is rarely measured directly. These researchers wanted to know, if the dependent variable was changed, would there still be a relationship between television violence and people's perceptions of victimization. They changed the dependent variable from fear of victimization to likelihood of being victimized. When the dependent variable changed, a positive relationship was still found. It was also noted that, if only the traditional measures were used, no evidence for media cultivation would have been found.

Some evidence for the fear of violence measure emerged. Doob et al. (1979) found all of Gerbner's basic findings to be replicable: people who watch an abundant amount of television are more likely to indicate fear of

their environment. It was found to be equally clear that this relationship disappears when attempts are made to control for the actual incidence of crime in the neighborhood. These findings suggest that television may act as a source of information, but it is not likely to be a direct cause of people's fear of being victims of crime.

The psychological effect that television has on its viewers is another area that has been studied. Loye et al. (1977) hypothesized that there are measurable psychosocial effects of television drama that can be beneficial and injurious depending on dramatic content. Subjects were assigned to watch one of five types of television programming. Two of the categories were shows that involve high prosocial or helpful content and shows that were high in violent or hurtful content. The spouses of the subjects made confidential daily reports on the number of helpful and hurtful behaviors the subjects exhibited. There were no significant differences between these two groups in helpful behavior. Differences were found in the number of hurtful behaviors. The subjects who watched violent programs were reported to have committed more hurtful behaviors than the subjects who watched the prosocial programs.

Behavioral problems among children as a result of violent television also have been given much consideration. McCarthy, Langer, Gerstein, Einsberg, and Orzeck (1975)



performed a five year follow-up study that considered outside variables, such as the amount of rent that families paid, the education of the parents, and the number of parents living in the house. Children who were from disadvantaged backgrounds were reported to watch more television and more violent programs. The three measures of aggression were conflict with parents, fighting, and delinquency. These measures were found to be related to the level and quantity of the programs viewed. Heavy amounts of violence viewing exhibited a positive correlation with these three types of aggressive behaviors. McCarthy et al. (1975) pointed out that it is questionable whether the behavioral problems resulted from the violent programming or the frustration from having disadvantaged backgrounds.

Huesmann, Eron, and Lagerspetz (1984) studied the effects that viewing television violence had on children by interviewing children from the United States and Finland. They found television violence viewing was profoundly related to concurrent aggression and significantly predicted future changes in aggression for girls in the United States and boys in both countries. The strength of the relationship depended on the regularity with which violence was viewed and the level of the violence. For boys, the effect was intensified by the degree to which the boy identified with the characters. A number of variables



were found to be correlates of aggression and violence viewing. Children from both countries who were most likely to be aggressive were the ones who watched violent programs most of the time they were on, believed that these shows portrayed life just as it is, frequently had aggressive fantasies, and identified strongly with the aggressive characters in the shows. In addition, these children most likely had an aggressive mother, had parents with lower social and education status, performed poorly in school, and were unpopular with their peers.

The strongest support for the relationship between television violence and viewer aggression has been found when studying the ways that children are affected. Wilson (1989) assessed the effectiveness of two desensitization strategies for reducing emotional reactions. In this study, children were assigned to one of three conditions before watching a frightening movie scene involving lizards. The three conditions were passive exposure to a lizard, modeled-exposure where the live lizard was touched by the experimenter, and no exposure, which served as a control group. The results of this study found modeled-exposure reduced emotional reactions to the movie scene and to lizards. Modeled-exposure also affected children's judgments of lizards. Passive-exposure was more limited in its effect on emotional responses and did not influence interpretations.

Much research has been devoted to the social learning and cultivation theories. The lack of reliable results has created a need for further research in these areas. When conducting future research, the variable of awareness should be given comprehensive consideration.

Before the variable of perception can be given consideration in future research, it is necessary to suggest that a lack of perception among viewers to television violence really does exist. Chapter 3 will discuss the methodology used in studying the hypotheses that viewers are more likely to recognize the violence in television programs that display explicit violence than in programs that contain implicit violence, and how the order in which programs are viewed affects the desensitization.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

The methodology used in this study to measure viewer perception to television violence consisted of an experiment where the subjects were exposed to four videotaped segments of television programs that contained violence. Participants in the experiment were also given a questionnaire and were asked to answer the questions that coincided with the segments they had just viewed.

### Research Subjects

The subjects were all college students enrolled in speech and theatre courses at Austin Peay State University. Ten classes with an average of twenty-one students were observed. Subjects were observed in a classroom environment. Classes were randomly assigned to two groups in order to test the second hypothesis that the order in which programs are viewed affects the level of desensitization that occurs. One group was shown the segment that contained explicit, or realistic, violence followed by three segments that contained various types of implicit violence. The other group was shown the three segments of implicit, or concealed, violence followed by the segment of explicit violence. The subjects were classified into groups by listing each of the various

sections of speech and theatre classes on separate pieces of paper. Each piece of paper was placed in a container, then drawn out and alternately positioned into one of the groups. The first section drawn was placed in the first group and the second section drawn was placed in the second group. This pattern continued until all the sections had been drawn from the container.

Two pretests were conducted to locate any problems that may have existed in the experiment. The subjects who participated in the pretests did not have any difficulty with the video segments or the questionnaire.

There was a probability that some of the students would be enrolled in more than one of these classes. To avoid any student participating in the experiment more than once, students who had previously participated were asked to leave the room during the experiment. The subjects were told that their participation was totally voluntary, that it would not affect their grade in any way, and that they could withdraw from the experiment at any time without penalty. They were also told their answers would be totally confidential. The students were then asked to sign a consent statement if they were willing to participate in the experiment.

#### Data Gathering

The subjects were then shown all four videotapes. The segments used in this experiment were chosen because they



all displayed the same types of violent acts. Each segment involved one or more characters hitting or slapping one or more of the other characters with an open hand or a fist.

The portion taken from the television movie Night of the Grizzly portrayed explicit violence. The piece taken from this program begins with two men arguing followed by a storeroom brawl. The other three segments all contained violence that was covered up or hidden in some way. The portion taken from Popeye involved a traditional fight between Popeye and Brutus. The segment taken from Batman consisted of a brawl where animated words were used to cover up the violent actions. A segment from one of The Three Stooges' episodes involved Moe and Larry hitting and slapping Curly and trying to remove a pickle lodged in Curly's mouth. The videotaped segments all represented equivalent violence based on two measures: the number of violent acts contained in each clip and the length of the clips. Each clip contained eight to ten acts of similar violence, and the duration of each clip was approximately 60 to 90 seconds.

Immediately after viewing the clips, subjects were asked to answer all of the questions on the questionnaire (see Appendix A). The first question asked the students to indicate in the appropriate place on the questionnaire whether or not their current residence received cable. The researcher believed this information was necessary to

avoid the possibility of future arguments that some of the programs had been taken from shows only available through basic cable and not all students have access to cable television. When the results were analyzed, subjects who had indicated they did not receive cable were treated the same as those who did receive cable television.

In the second section, subjects were asked to answer four questions for each segment. Their responses were measured on a Likert-like scale. The subjects could circle one number for each question in all four segments that ranged from a five to a one. For example, the subjects would circle five if they felt the material shown in the segment was very violent, one if they felt the material was not violent, or a number in between depending on the level of violence they felt they observed in the segment.

The first question for each segment measured their feelings of the humorous content in the program. The second question assessed their observations of the violence contained in the portion of the program. The third question evaluated the level of entertainment they experienced in the segment, and the fourth question gauged the believability of the material. The responses to questions associated with violence were the only responses analyzed.

Questions dealing with humor, entertainment, and believability were of no concern for this research. They

were only asked to disguise the purpose of the research. Only one question from each clip dealt with the level of violence. This study was only concerned with the viewer's level of perception for the violence contained in each clip. Asking more than one question about violence per clip could have given away the purpose of the study thus making the results less accurate.

Upon completion of the experiment, 211 subjects had been exposed to the videotaped segments of television programming and had completed the survey. The 110 subjects in Group 1 were shown the three segments of implicit violence prior to the segments of explicit violence. The 101 subjects in Group 2 were exposed to the videotaped segments in the reverse order.

### Analysis Procedures

The data were analyzed to discover whether subjects felt the videotaped segments containing implicit violence were less violent than the clip containing explicit violence. If the results of the survey yielded such a result, then the first hypothesis would be confirmed. If the group that viewed the explicit violence first experienced greater desensitization than the group that viewed the previously taped program portions in the reverse order, then the second hypothesis would also be confirmed. The level of desensitization that occurred was measured by comparing the average score of each of the implicit



segments shown to Group 1 to the average score of that same implicit clip shown to Group 2.

A computerized statistical program was run to calculate the frequencies and averages of the answers recorded in the questionnaires. The statistical program also was used to run t-tests to find out if the results of the survey were statistically significant. The results were considered significant if the 2-tailed probability of the pooled variance estimate was .05 or less.

The remaining chapters will analyze the results from the survey and discuss the impact these findings should have on future research. Chapter 4 will concentrate on reporting the findings generated from the experiment.



## CHAPTER 4

### Study Results

The two hypotheses proposed in this study were both confirmed. The first hypothesis stated that viewers would be more likely to perceive the violence in actions from explicit, or realistic, television programs than to perceive it in similar actions from programs that used implicit, or concealed, violence. Both groups experienced vastly greater awareness to the violence in the explicit segment than to the violence in any one of the three segments containing implicit violence. The previously taped segment from Night of the Grizzly obtained an average rating of 3.6 with 5 being the most violent. The only segment that contained implicit violence to receive an average level of violence of over 3 was the one taken from Batman. The segment taken from Popeye was viewed as the third most violent of the programs with an average violence rating of 2.85. The least rated as violent of the four segments viewed, but not far behind Popeye, was the Three Stooges, which received an average rating of 2.65. When a t-test was run comparing these means, significant differences were found between Night of the Grizzly and each of the other three videos, with a 2-tailed probability of .000 for each segment. (see Table 1).

Table 1

Mean Violence Ratings with Standard Deviations, t-Values, and 2-Tail Probabilities Between Night of the Grizzly and Other Videotaped Segments

	Mean	Standard Deviation	t Value	2-tail Probability
<u>Night of the Grizzly</u>	3.61	1.096	NA	NA
<u>Three Stooges</u>	2.65	1.230		
<u>N of G</u>			9.96	.000
<u>Batman</u>	3.09	1.145		
<u>N of G</u>			6.40	.000
<u>Popeye</u>	2.85	1.173		
<u>N of G</u>			8.65	.000

Of the 211 subjects that participated in the experiment, 122 (57.8%) marked at least level 4 on the questionnaire when asked to indicate the level of violence in the segment taken from Night of the Grizzly. Forty-eight (22.7%) of the 211 subjects indicated a 5, the highest possible violence rating for this segment. The segment taken from Batman received 81 (38.4%) responses of 4 or higher, which was the most among the implicit segments. Twenty-three (10.9%) of the 211 subjects indicated 5 regarding the level of violence in this

segment. In the segments from Popeye and the Three Stooges, more subjects indicated the response for the least level of violence (1) than the response for the most violence (5). Forty-seven (22.3%) subjects marked the violence rating of 1 for the Three Stooges where only 17 (8.1%) marked 5. Twenty-nine (13.7%) subjects marked a violence rating of 1 for Popeye compared to 18 (8.5%) who marked 5. Table 2 breaks down the responses to each segment concerning the levels of violence.

Table 2

Number of Subjects Rating the Segments for Each Possible Response and the Percentage of All Subjects Indicating Each Response

	Least		Violence		Most	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
<u>Night of the Grizzly</u>	11 5.2%	20 9.5%	58 27.5%	74 35.1%	48 22.7%	211 100%
<u>Three Stooges</u>	47 22.3%	50 23.7%	60 28.4%	37 17.5%	17 8.1%	211 100%
<u>Batman</u>	21 10.0%	43 20.4%	66 31.3%	58 27.5%	23 10.9%	211 100%
<u>Popeye</u>	29 13.7%	58 27.5%	58 27.5%	48 22.7%	18 8.5%	211 100%

The second hypothesis stated that subjects who were exposed to the explicit violence first would be less likely to perceive the violence in the implicit segments than the



subjects who watched the segments in the reverse order. Table 3 shows that viewing explicit violence first desensitized the subjects' perception to the segments containing implicit violence. The subjects in Group 2 who were shown the segments containing explicit violence first perceived less violence in the segments containing implicit violence. The average response to the violence in the segment taken from the Three Stooges was 2.48 when the subjects had been previously exposed to video containing explicit violence. When the subjects had not been previously exposed to video segments containing explicit violence, the average response to the level of violence in the exact same segment of the Three Stooges was 2.82. When a t-test was run comparing these two means, they were found to be significantly different with a 2-tailed probability of .043 (see Table 3).

As shown in Table 3, the only implicit program segment not to exhibit a significant difference from the experimental group to the control group was Popeye. It is also interesting to note that Batman, the segment with the highest level of awareness among the implicit segments, was also the segment that experienced the greatest level of desensitization when the order in which the segments were shown was reversed.

Table 3

Comparison of Violence Ratings Between Groups with  
Standard Deviation, t Values, and 2-Tail Probabilities

	Mean	Standard Deviation	t Value	2-tail Probability
<u>Night of the Grizzly</u>				
Group 1	3.60	1.127	-.09	.927
Group 2	3.61	1.067		
<u>Three Stooges</u>				
Group 1	2.82	1.308	2.04	.043
Group 2	2.48	1.119		
<u>Batman</u>				
Group 1	3.26	1.194	2.32	.021
Group 2	2.90	1.063		
<u>Popeye</u>				
Group 1	2.96	1.241	1.49	.137
Group 2	2.72	1.087		

The segment containing explicit violence from The Night of the Grizzly did not reveal a significant difference of awareness between groups. This indicates that no reverse effect was found. Viewing implicit violence prior to explicit violence did not have any effect on the subjects' awareness of the explicit violence.

The significance of the findings gained from this study will be discussed in Chapter 5.



## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion of Results

This study attempted to determine to what degree television viewers perceive the violence they are exposed to while watching television. The results from the experiment confirmed both of the hypotheses proposed in this study.

The first hypothesis stated that viewers perceive more violence when the violent acts are explicit or realistic than when they are implicit or concealed in some way. The evidence found to support this hypothesis included the high level of perception of the explicit violence in the segment from The Night of the Grizzly compared to the lower levels of perception in the three segments containing implicit violence. The findings from the experiment indicate that the best way to conceal violence is through humor. The segment from the Three Stooges, which used humor to mask the violence, created the greatest lack of viewer awareness. The average response indicated on the survey for the level of violence in this segment was 2.65 compared to 3.61 for the segment from The Night of the Grizzly,

which consisted of explicit violence. Animation seems to be the next best way to conceal violence. Popeye received an average violence level of 2.82.

According to the results, the least successful way to mask violence is by covering it up with words describing the action as in the segment taken from Batman. Batman received an average response of 3.09 for the level of violence perceived by the subjects.

The second hypothesis was that the order in which programs are viewed will have an effect on the degree to which violence is perceived in television programs. Viewing explicit violence prior to implicit violence desensitizes the viewer to the latter type of violence. The results from the experiment support this hypothesis as well. Viewers were significantly desensitized to the violence in two of the three videotaped program segments that contained implicit violence when they were exposed to the segment containing explicit violence first. It is ironic that the segment from Batman, which was not as successful in concealing the violence, experienced the greatest level of desensitization when the order in which the segments were shown was reversed. Other than the segment from The Night of the Grizzly, the only segment not to show significant amounts of desensitization was the one taken from Popeye. This failure to find a significant difference could be attributed to the possibility that

people view cartoons differently from other types of programs. If individuals believe that an act of aggression is violent even if the character is animated or believe an animated character is incapable of committing a violent act, they will probably hold these positions regardless of the order in which the programs are viewed.

The results from this study strongly indicate a lack of perception of television violence among viewers. The findings are significant when considering future research in this area or related areas such as the social learning and cultivation theories. The level of perception to the violence in programs should be considered a key variable in future research. This variable could be at least partially responsible for the lack of reliable results of previous research in these areas. In the future, it is key for researchers to make sure they completely define violence and the subjects fully understand the various aspects of violence in whatever context the violence is used.

Finding that viewers do not fully perceive the profuse amounts of implicit violence in television programming is not only significant, but alarming. The exposure to this type of violence may not have a short term effect on viewers but could have some type of long term effect. Something that goes seemingly unnoticed may not affect a person's immediate actions, but being subjected to violence that may be picked up subconsciously over a long period of



time might eventually affect a person's actions and thoughts.

Having discovered a lack of perception to television violence, the next step in this research would be to find out what effect, if any, this unnoticed violence has on its viewers. It is very possible that viewing this type of violence over a long period could create more aggressive attitudes and a greater acceptance of violence among viewers. If they are unaware of the level of violence, they may be less able to marshal defenses against the subconscious effects of such viewed violence.

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## APPENDICES

## Thesis Survey

please circle yes or no for the following question.

Does your current residence receive cable television?  
yes      no

please circle the one number that best represents your feelings in the various categories for each of the following clips.

clip # 1 (Three Stooges)

I found this clip to be:

very humorous	5	4	3	2	1	not humorous
very violent	5	4	3	2	1	not violent
very entertaining	5	4	3	2	1	not entertaining
very believable	5	4	3	2	1	not believable

clip # 2 (Batman)

I found this clip to be:

very humorous	5	4	3	2	1	not humorous
very violent	5	4	3	2	1	not violent
very entertaining	5	4	3	2	1	not entertaining
very believable	5	4	3	2	1	not believable

clip # 3 (Popeye)

I found this clip to be:

very humorous	5	4	3	2	1	not humorous
very violent	5	4	3	2	1	not violent
very entertaining	5	4	3	2	1	not entertaining
very believable	5	4	3	2	1	not believable

clip # 4 (Night of the Grizzly)

I found this clip to be:

very humorous	5	4	3	2	1	not humorous
very violent	5	4	3	2	1	not violent
very entertaining	5	4	3	2	1	not entertaining
very believable	5	4	3	2	1	not believable



## INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

The purpose of this investigation is to test audience's reactions to television techniques. Your responses are confidential. At no time will you be identified nor will anyone other than the investigators have access to your responses. The demographic information collected will be used only for purposes of analysis. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you are free to terminate your participation at any time without any penalty.

The scope of the project will be explained fully upon completion.

Thank you for your cooperation.

\*\*\*\*\*

I agree to participate in the present study being conducted under the supervision of a faculty member of the Department of Speech, Communication and Theatre at Austin Peay State University. I have been informed, either orally or in writing or both, about the procedures to be followed and about any discomforts or risks which may be involved. The investigator has offered to answer any further inquiries I may have regarding the procedures. I understand that I am free to terminate my participation at any time without penalty or prejudice and to have all data obtained from me withdrawn from the study and destroyed. I have also been told of any benefits that may result from my participation.

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NAME (PLEASE PRINT)

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SIGNATURE

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DATE