

Studies of the Effects of Media on Antisocial Behaviour

Berkowitz (1969)

Aim: to show that violent films can lead to violent behaviour in already-aroused pps.

Sample: university students.

Design: lab experiment with 2 independent measures.

Method: pps divided into 2 groups. Half given 1 electric shock, half given 7 shocks by a confed (IV1=non-anxious/anxious). Groups then subdivided. Half watched a violent film, half watched an exciting non-violent film (IV2 = violent/non-violent film). Pps then given the opportunity to give shocks to the confed (DV=number of shocks given).

Result: angered pps that watched violent film gave significantly more shocks than other three groups.

Conclusion: violent film cued aggression in pps already predisposed to act aggressively.

Parke et al (1977)

Aim: to show increased aggression as a result of exposure to violent TV programmes.

Sample: young offenders living in different cottages in an institution.

Design: field experiment with independent measures.

Method: normal TV service was discontinued. Pps in one cottage saw only programmes with violent content (e.g. 'Batman', 'The Untouchables'). Pps in other cottage saw only non-violent programmes (IV=violent/non-violent programming). Institution staff observed and recorded behaviour of the pps (DV=observer ratings of aggression).

Result: an increase in aggression was observed in the 'violent programmes' group.

Conclusion: exposure to violent programmes led to increased aggression levels.

Belson (1978)

Aim: to identify a link between viewing habits and aggressive behaviour.

Sample: teenage boys.

Design: correlational study based on retrospective interview data.

Method: boys were interviewed about their viewing habits over the previous ten years (V1=level of TV violence watched) and about their aggressive behaviour (V2=self-ratings of aggression).

Result: a significant positive correlation was found between the two measures. The more violent programmes watched, the higher the level of aggression.

Conclusion: Viewing habits over time had affected aggressive behaviour.

Williams (1986)

Aim: to show effect of TV aggression on the behaviour of children.

Sample: 6-11 year-olds in an isolated community in Canada, where TV had previously been unavailable.

Design: natural experiment with repeated measures. Longitudinal design.

Method: behaviour of 6-11 year old children was assessed over a two-year period following the introduction of TV for the first time (IV=time after introduction of TV). Teachers and peers gave ratings of pps aggression levels (DV=ratings of aggression).

Result: Significant increases in aggressive behaviour, regardless of sex and how much TV was watched. There were no corresponding increases in a comparison community where TV was already available.

Conclusion: Introduction of TV led to an increase in aggression amongst target population.

Milarsky et al (1982)

Aim: to assess strength of link between viewing habits and behaviour.

Sample: 3200 children aged 7-16.

Design: Correlational study with a longitudinal design.

Method: Over a three-year period, pps were interviewed 6 times. At each interview they reported which TV programmes (rated for violent content) they watched (V1=level of aggression watched). Peer ratings and self-reports of aggression were obtained (V2=peer/self-ratings of aggression).

Result: a small positive correlation was found between the two measures. However, it was relatively minor compared to the impact of family background, social environment and school performance.

Conclusion: TV violence makes only a minor contribution to aggressive behaviour.

Charlton et al (1999)

Aim: to assess the impact of TV introduction on a remote community.

Sample: School-age children on St.Helena, a small island in the Atlantic.

Design: natural experiment with repeated measures.

Method: Children's behaviour was assessed before and after the introduction of TV for the first time (IV=before/after TV). Aggression was measured thru' peer and teacher ratings.

Results: There was no increase in aggression following the introduction of TV.

Conclusion: TV violence did not affect children's behaviour.

Johnson et al (2002)

Aim: to assess impact of viewing habits on behaviour.

Sample: children from 707 families in New York state.

Design: Correlational study with a longitudinal design.

Method: Families divided into low & high TV watchers. Viewing habits monitored over 20 years (V1=amount of TV watched). Self-reports and family reports taken of aggressive behaviour (V2=ratings of aggression).

Result: Those who watched most TV also committed the highest number of violent acts.

Conclusion: watching more than 1 hour of TV per day significantly increases aggression, especially between the ages of 14-16.

Issues in Media-Aggression Research

Measurement problems

Assessing how much TV violence is actually watched.

Controlling what is viewed as in Berkowitz (1969) and Parke et al (1977) – OK in short term, impossible in long term.

Electronic monitoring of viewing – practically difficult & expensive as specialist equipment needed. Tells you if TV was on, but not if anyone was watching.

Concurrent self-reports of viewing (e.g. viewing diaries) – OK if people are consistent and honest in their reporting, but they may not be.

Retrospective self-reports of viewing (e.g. interviews) – unreliable as memory is prone to distortion and forgetting.

Measuring how aggressive people are.

Lab-based measures such as giving shocks – unrealistic & pps have to be cued to give shocks so not spontaneous either.

Observer ratings from peers, teachers & researchers – not very good as subjective, lacking in inter-observer consistency and open to bias.

Self-ratings – unsatisfactory as subjective and prone to social desirability effects.

Criminal convictions for violence – unsatisfactory as many acts of aggression are not crimes and in any case, most crimes go unreported.

Research Design Problems

Lab experiments – lack ecological validity, use artificial stimuli and only measure short-term effects.

Field experiments – higher ecological validity, but less control, so causal inferences are more speculative. Again, may only measure short-term effects.

Natural experiments – very high ecological validity, but no control so v. unreliable and causal inferences are speculative. May also use abnormal samples, as communities without TV are likely to be isolated, close-knit etc.

Correlational designs – problems establishing cause & effect, i.e. does violent TV make people more aggressive, or do aggressive people watch more violent TV? Affected by third variables e.g. more TV may be watched in low-income households; low TV viewing may be associated e.g. with strong religious beliefs.

Conclusions

Gunter & MacAleer (1990): 'we are still a long way from knowing fully the extent and character of TV's influence on children's aggressive behaviour.'

Van-Velsen (1998): 'there are fashions in violence as in everything else. They want to blame the [Columbine] killings on Marilyn [Manson]...the real reason they happened is because they let them have guns.'

Putwain & Sammons (2002): 'The evidence regarding the effects of violent media on aggressive behaviour is far from clear and it would be unwise to state unequivocally that the two are causally linked.'

Cumberbatch (2002): 'researchers that believe in a link [between TV and aggression] have a tendency to torture the data until they confess.'