FILM VIOLENCE AND YOUNG OFFENDERS

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ABSTRACT. Recent assertions have been made that viewing violent material on film and video may influence children and adolescents who commit violent acts. It has also been proposed that heavy exposure to television violence in childhood is associated with violent crime as an adult, although others have emphasized that experiencing “real” violence as a child has a much greater effect on aggressive predispositions. Ways in which screen violence can effect behavior includes: imitation of violent roles and acts of aggression, triggering aggressive impulses in predisposed individuals, desensitizing feelings of sympathy towards victims, creating an indifference to the use of violence, and creating a frame of mind that sees violent acts as a socially acceptable response to stress and frustration. It is argued that young offenders may like violent videos because of their aggressive background and behavioral tendencies. Whether such tastes reinforce violent behavior and increase the frequency of aggressive acts and antisocial behavior is open to question. This question needs an urgent answer given the availability of violent video film either to be viewed in the home environment appropriately (i.e., the whole film in real time) or inappropriately (i.e., from one violent scene to the next viewed in slow motion and freeze-frame). © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd

KEY WORDS. Film effects, viewing violence, young offenders, aggressive behavior

OVER THE PAST 3 years, the debate as to whether violence in the media has a damaging impact on its audience has once again come to the forefront of people’s minds. Certain events have again generated an academic and clinical interest in the effects of viewing violent imagery. One event was the release of Oliver Stone’s film “Natural Born Killers” (“NBK”) in 1995. Despite the film being screened all around the Western World without a second thought, it was delayed in the UK for 3 months. This delay was due to “much moral debate while the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) investigated claims that it had inspired copy killings” (Petre, 1995; Sunday Telegraph, February 26). The BBFC, as the board responsible for classifying, cutting, and in some cases, banning cinema and video films (since the UK Video Recordings Act, 1984), were investigating the reported
allegations that up to 10 killings had been linked to the “NBK” film. For example, in Dallas, a 14-year-old boy decapitated a young girl after seeing the film and told friends that he wanted to be famous like “the natural born killers in the movie.” In Paris, a pair of students went on a killing spree inspired by the film, and in Utah, a young man killed two people, which the local police thought was prompted by the film (The Guardian, March 4, 1995).

In the UK, the whole debate had already been highlighted with the murder of James Bulger by two 10-year-old boys. Here again, violent films, especially “Child’s Play 3” and “Juice,” were implicated in the Bulger case, the murder of Suzanne Capper, and the kicking to death of Les Read (The Guardian, November 27 and December 22, 1993). The similarity between certain aspects of these crimes, and parts of the video films, made people believe that these violent films had caused individuals concerned to commit terrible crimes. Indeed, the trial judge for the James Bulger case, “voiced his strong suspicion that exposure to violent videos played a strong part in corrupting the two boys concerned” (Association of Chief Police Officers, 1994, p. 22).

The claims from individuals and the British tabloid newspapers’ obsessive wish to link James Bulger’s murder to a violent video film were criticized heavily, and these allegations were actually unfounded by closer examination of the above three named cases.

Earl Ferrers told the House of Lords, “the police reports did not support the theory that those crimes had been influenced by exposure to any particular video, or to videos in general, and no evidence about the role of video was presented in any of the prosecutions” (HL Deb. 6/14/94, cited in the Home Affairs Committee, 1994, p. vi). Indeed, it has been argued that “it is as silly to blame a single film as it is to indict the Bible” which forensic researchers have found to be the single most frequently quoted justification used by “noble-cause” killers who are pathological murderers of prostitutes and homosexuals (The Guardian, March 4, 1995).

Vine (1995) makes the suggestion that some people are struggling so hard to find an answer as to why two 10-year-old boys would brutally torture and kill a toddler that in desperation they make a rash judgement that videos caused the crimes. Gauntlett (1995), the author of a new study at the University of Leeds, says television is being irresponsibly blamed for societal problems. Others claim it is dangerous to over-simplify and ignore the complex causes of antisocial behavior, such as growing up in a violent home or living in a violent community.

Despite this, Newson (1994a, 1994b) strongly believes there is an established causal relationship between violent videos and criminal behavior. Her report, “Video Violence and the Protection of Children” (Newson, 1994a), was cited by David Alton MP in support of his proposed Amendment to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill. This amendment would have meant tighter restrictions on videos that were considered to be psychologically damaging to children. However, as James Ferman, director of the BBFC said, “the amendment would have resulted in the banning of films such as ‘Schindlers List’ from video on the grounds that it presented a bad role model for children” (Douglas, 1995; Radio Times, May 27–June 6). The UK Government decided to reject David Alton’s proposal and re-examine the issue in order to make their own amendments. The Home Affairs Committee (1994) commissioned several experts from the relevant fields of psychology, communication research, and organizations involved in the protection of children to give evidence on this debate for a special report, “Video Violence and Young Offenders.”

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

On this point, researchers are somewhat divided with two schools of thought being diametrically opposed (Vine, 1995). At one end of the scale there are “media pessimists.”
These are the experts, who like Newson (1994b), believe that television or screen violence can be very harmful and in the most extreme cases can be a causal factor in aggressive and violent criminal acts. At the other end are the “media sceptics,” who among others include Cumberbatch and Howitt (1989), “whose beliefs that there is no evidence of harm have been well known and widely publicized over a period of 25 years” (Itzin, 1994, p. 62).

Somewhere between these two extremes are various points on the continuum where the evidence of a link varies in strength: 1) there is some correlation between video violence and actual violence but it is not causal (e.g., Vine, 1994); 2) there is a strong link, but only for those predisposed to being aggressive (e.g., Browne, 1995); and 3) certain genres of films and the type of violence have a differential impact on the audience behaving aggressively (e.g., Gunter & Furnham, 1984).

Therefore, it is important to discuss some of this research to illustrate how, if at all, it is believed that television and film violence can influence the audience. However, it is necessary to point out two fundamental limitations. First, the majority of studies examine the broader concept of television violence rather than video violence which is more explicit. Second, the audience studied is usually a sample from the general population rather than concentrating on groups that may be more vulnerable to the effects of violence in the media, such as young offenders.

Research has looked at all types of media in all kinds of ways with the main types of studies including: program content analyses, laboratory experiments, field experimental studies, field interviews and surveys, naturalistic studies, and longitudinal studies in the field (see Table 1). A full explanation of these approaches along with their advantages and disadvantages can be seen in various reviews (e.g., Cumberbatch, 1995; Strasburger, 1995; Wober, 1989). In 1982, the National Institute of Mental Health listed over 1,000 published research findings in this field. As Cumberbatch (1994, p. 492) states, “violence has probably been the most researched topic in the vast literature on mass communications.”

**Effects of Violence on Television**

The American Psychological Association claims that the average American child or teenager views 10,000 murders, rapes, and aggravated assaults per year on television alone (Huston et al., 1992). So what kind of impact does this kind of viewing material have?

Meta-analysis is a procedure which combines summary data collected from a group of studies to calculate average effect size. This type of analysis has been applied to a large proportion of studies and supports the finding that aggressive or anti-social behavior can be increased after watching violent television (Strasburger, 1995). For example, Andison (1977) found that in 77% of studies, media violence was linked to aggression in the audience. Paik (1991) also found that in a dozen studies, media violence could be linked with cases of burglary, theft, and criminal violence. Comstock’s (1991) main conclusion in his review of more than 1,000 studies was that although some group and cultural distinctions appear, a positive association between violent entertainment and aggressive behavior was evident.

However, as the critics have pointed out, associations between aggression and media violence are quite distinct from causal relationships and this must be kept in mind. Itzin (1994) writes, “correlation does not prove causality. It never can. Causality is a standard of proof that rarely, if ever, can be achieved, and is barely, if ever, required.” However, correlation is itself evidence.

Longitudinal studies carried out in the U.S. measured the cumulative effects of viewing violence over a period of time with the aim to provide evidence for causality, as well as producing correlations (Strasburger, 1995). Out of the six existing studies, five produced
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unequivocal evidence that there is a strong connection between television violence and aggressive behavior (Huesmann & Eron, 1986; Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984; Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder, & Huesmann, 1972; Singer, Singer, & Rapaczynski, 1984; Singer & Singer, 1981), and one did not (Milavsky, Kessler, Stipp, & Rubens, 1982).

The investigations conducted by Huesmann and colleagues produced remarkable results when they studied a cohort of people at three different ages (8, 19, and 30 years). At age 30, they found a relationship between watching television violence at age 8 and aggressive or antisocial behavior 22 years later (Huesmann et al., 1984; Lefkowitz et al., 1972). Therefore, “If a child’s observation of media violence promotes the learning of aggressive habits, it can have harmful lifelong consequences” (Huesmann, 1986, p. 129). However, the longitudinal study carried out by Milavsky et al. (1982) did not support the view that viewing violence leads to aggressive behavior, although critics of Milavsky’s study have re-analyzed the data to show that it actually supports a causal explanation found by the other studies (Cook, Kendzierski, & Thomas, 1983).

In the UK, Belson (1978) studied 1,565 London male teenagers and found that those who watched a greater amount of violent television committed markedly more seriously harmful criminal acts. The less serious categories of criminal acts were also positively associated with greater exposure to violence on television. Two particular forms of antisocial or aggressive behavior were associated with this exposure to television violence: aggressiveness in sport and play, and swearing.

Further work carried out in Holland by Vooijs and van der Voort (1993) emphasized the importance of role models in television violence. Their studies indicated that while most children reject violent behavior committed by “baddies,” and were less likely to be influenced by it, the “goodies” could do no wrong.

The most well known naturalistic studies compared places which had television to places which did not, to see if there were differences in levels of aggression between the two areas. Centerwall (1989) compared white homicide rates in South Africa with those in the U.S. and Canada by taking advantage of the fact that South Africa did not have television before 1975. Results indicated that “following the introduction of television, homicide rates doubled in Canada and the U.S. whereas in South Africa, where television did not as yet exist, white homicide rates remained the same over time” (Centerwall, 1989, p. 645). In 1983, data on white homicide rates in South Africa also showed that the annual rate was greater than in the years before the introduction of television (Centerwall, 1989). One factor needs to be taken in to account when looking at these results: The variable used was exposure to television in general rather than the more specific exposure to television violence. Therefore, it needs to be recognized that other factors about television viewing may be important in leading to violent behavior than television violence alone. In Centerwall’s own words, “It is best to keep an open mind on the matter” (p. 651).

A study by Williams (1986) was similar to the above in that it compared three towns in Canada: “Notel” (no television), “Unitel” (one station), and “Multitel” (multiple stations). The towns were nearly identical apart from whether they had television or not. Data on children’s physical and verbal aggression was obtained for the 2-year period before television was introduced and for the 2-year period after its introduction. It was concluded from the results that aggression increased in the children of “Notel” after the introduction of television and that they had caught up with their peers from “Unitel” and “Multitel” in the post-television 2-year period.

A full critical review of studies on the effects of violence on television is given by Cumberbatch (1995) in his report to the Council of Europe Steering Committee on the Mass Media. As always, he challenges whether the effects found are valid and really do exist, but his arguments are not convincing. Unfortunately, both the amount of studies
in this area and their debate go beyond the scope of this paper, as does a critical debate on the related area of the effects of pornography on sexual violence (see Linz & Malamuth, 1993; Weisz & Earls, 1995).

**Theories and Concepts on the Effects of Violent Film**

A number of concepts to explain the effects of violent film have emerged from social learning and cognitive theories. One such concept is disinhibition, where watching violence on the screen reduces inhibitions towards violence (Bushman & Geen, 1990). Violence becomes seen as a “normal” response to stress and frustration and acceptable to society, which in effect changes people’s own moral code and attitudes towards the use of violence (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 1993).

Desensitization has been said to occur through repeated exposure to violent images as people become more acceptable of real-life violence and demand more extreme forms of violence on the screen (Gunter, 1990). The problem then becomes cyclical; the audience demands more explicit violence, the film-makers respond by making their films more graphic, which in turn desensitizes the audience and a vicious circle is established. The problem is that exposure to screen violence makes people less concerned about others, and also leads to them becoming more aroused so they are more likely to behave aggressively (Thomas, Horton, Lippencott, & Drabman, 1977).

Evidence for the process of desensitization has been provided by Drabman and Thomas (1974), who conducted a study with 8 year olds to determine which children would be more likely to seek help after witnessing a fight in the playroom. Children who viewed a violent film prior to watching the fight were less likely to tell an adult and act responsibly than children who had not seen the violent film. This implies they had become more tolerant of real-life violence due to their exposure to violent images on the screen. Some people have argued, however, that although it is easy to desensitize someone to a repeated scene, it does not necessarily mean that this will lead to a desensitization of new violent images (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 1993).

Perhaps the most prominent theory partly developed from the research on screen violence is social learning theory. Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1963), carried out a series of laboratory experiments to investigate under what circumstances children would imitate aggressive behavior. First, the children were mildly frustrated (by not being allowed to play with toys); then, they watched a film where an adult starts hitting and kicking a “Bobo doll” (plastic punching bag with a red nose). They were divided into three groups: those who saw the aggressor being rewarded, those who saw the aggressor being punished, and a neutral group who saw no consequences for the behavior. The model-rewarded group and the control group showed a considerable number of aggressive behaviors with the model-punished group only showing limited imitation. This showed that despite having acquired aggressive acts in their repertoire, they would only be acted out in favorable circumstances. It would, therefore, appear that we have a strong case of “observational learning” dependent on perceived efficacy. Similar results were shown by Bandura et al. (1963) in a further study; where socially reprehensible behavior was being modeled as long as it was successful.

Imitation was demonstrated in these and a subsequent experiment inviting the children to recall the aggressive acts, that all the experimental children could perform the aggressive acts they had witnessed if the circumstances were right. This is consistent with the social learning theory developed by Bandura (1973). In support of Bandura’s work, Hicks (1965) found that children could reproduce the aggressive acts that they had been exposed to up to 8 months later.
Theories developed by Berkowitz (1984) and Huesmann (1986) were based on establishing what role the violent stimuli had on the cognitive processes which would lead the viewer to becoming aggressive.

Berkowitz’s (1984) “cognitive neo-association” theory worked on the principle that cognitions and thoughts are interconnected by means of association. The connecting pathways are strengthened by “similarity and semantic relatedness.” Therefore, he suggests that television and film violence might prime other aggressive ideas, feelings, and actions after viewing through “semantically strengthened associative pathways.” This leads to the priming of aggression with viewers being more likely to have aggressive ideas and actions after watching film violence (Josephson, 1987).

Huesmann and Eron (1986) developed a “social cognitive” theory in which they describe violence on the screen being learned as a cognitive script to be used in social situations. The aggressive script is acquired as a way to behave, and whether people will use it depends on the amount of similarity between the situation at the time of retrieval and the situation at the time the script is encoded in memory.

Triggers are a concept included in both cognitive theories, together with the notion of “cue-triggered aggression.” Huesmann and Eron (1986) suggest that aggressive behavior would be retrieved if a retrieval cue was present. However, Berkowitz (1984) claims ordinary situational stimuli could be paired with an aggressive scene and, in a subsequent situation, could be used to elicit aggression, especially if the person was already in an aggressive mood (i.e., was frustrated or angered). Evidence for these contentions was provided by Berkowitz and Geen (1967). They found that participants who were provided with the opportunity to be aggressive (in this case, give electric shocks) would act more strongly if the victim was linked to the aggressive film in some way. Other studies do not support these results and critics have suggested that violent films do not produce aggression per se but produce arousal instead (Tannenbaum & Zillman, 1975; Zillman, 1979). Indeed, Cumberbatch (1995) offers a detailed critical discussion of these concepts.

Nevertheless, other studies have supported Berkowitz’s theory by investigating how individual differences in aggression interact with the violent stimuli in the elicitation of related aggressive thoughts and actions.

In Bushman and Geen’s (1990) first experiment, they asked participants to recall their thoughts after viewing and rate the particular scene for violence levels. Results demonstrated that people exposed to violent television films were more likely to form aggressive cognitions than those who were not exposed. Aggressive thoughts increased with the level of violence in the scene. A second experiment showed that violent media evoked emotional responses which were related to aggression. However, individual differences moderated the responses to the violent stimuli. As Markus and Zajonc (1985) argue, the differences produced in these experiments are not simply random error and need deeper exploration.

Josephson (1987) looked at the characteristic level of aggression to examine whether the cueing-effect was more prominent in those with higher levels of trait aggression. Just as in Berkowitz’s (1984) experiments, participants were frustrated either before or after the film. The participants were asked to play floor hockey after viewing the film, during which they were observed and aggressive behavior was noted. Results showed that the violent imagery did increase aggressive behavior, although only among the groups which had a moderately high average level of characteristic aggression. These highly aggressive groups also behaved more aggressively if they were exposed to violent images and cues. The cue was a walkie-talkie which was shown in the film and then during an interview prior to the hockey game; it was used on one group while the others were interviewed using a tape-recorder and microphone. In the “violence and cue” condition, the effect of having highly aggressive males in the group increased the aggression levels of the
characteristically low aggressive males. Results from Josephson’s (1987) experiment can be explained using social cognitive theory. In terms of social scripting, males predisposed to being aggressive would be expected to have a large number of scripts which shared common features with the aggressive scene they had watched. However, for those who are less characteristically aggressive, they need the cue (the walkie-talkie) to link the floor hockey game with the aggressive script in the film. Therefore, individual differences may play an important role in the effects of screen violence, such as the predisposition to be aggressive.

**Susceptibility to Violent Film**

Dorr and Kovanic (1981) reviewed several studies that examined individual differences and concluded that screen violence can affect viewers of both sexes, different ages, social classes, and ethnicities. Research has shown that more aggressive youths are more likely to be influenced by exposure to screen violence (e.g., Hartman, 1969; Leyens, Camino, Parke, & Berkowitz, 1975; Stein & Friedrich, 1972). For example, Sebastian, Parke, Berkowitz, and West (1978) studied boys in a minimum-security prison. Boys who viewed aggressive films were more aggressive afterwards than the boys who saw a non-aggressive film.

Studies on the susceptibility to the effects of screen violence emerged after it was suggested in the U.S. Surgeon General's (Surgeon General’s Scientific Advisory Committee, 1972) report that the causal relationship between viewing violence and behaving aggressively was only true for those people predisposed to being aggressive. However, Kniveton and Stephenson (1973) found that intellectual deprivation was a mediating factor in that children who had little to interest them were more likely to imitate role models from the screen. McCarthy, Langner, Gersten, Eisenberg, and Orzech (1975) suggested that the amount of television watched (which was positively related to aggression) was linked to earlier psychopathology and lowered intellectual functioning. It was also proposed that television violence damages early socialization as children learn to accept aggression as a normal behavior (Cline, 1976). Lefkowitz and Huesmann (1981) suggest that to fully understand and determine which people are susceptible to screen violence, it is necessary to take a cognitive approach such as how people understand what they watch and how they evaluate what they see in terms of their own moral understanding.

Recently, it has been argued that measurements such as skin responses or brain waves provide insight into when audiences get excited; however, they provide little qualitative data on why they get excited (Buckingham, 1996). It is, therefore, necessary to see the viewer as “actively” watching the screen. Reactions to what is being viewed are produced by the viewer ascribing some mental meaning to them, and judging the actions to accord or not with their own moral standards and experiences. The viewer’s moral and other evaluative standards for personal conduct are key elements in the complex causal network on which reactions to screen imagery depend (Vine, 1994).

Consequently, there may be “vulnerable” individuals who are particularly susceptible to what they see on the screen (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 1993). Browne (1995) states that not everyone who watches violence on the screen will become violent. However, for the 3 to 10% of the population who are predisposed to being violent when frustrated, possibly as a result of growing up with violent parents, these films are unhealthy. In opposition, Vine (1994, p. 52) claims that research has not looked at what precisely causes such vulnerability and says that the people affected are “probably not confined to those who are already chronically aggressive, or from the lowest social classes.”

Several factors are correlated with having a violent disposition, including having poor
parental role-models, inconsistent discipline, and being abused by a parent. All of these factors can lead to the development of a deviant personality and allow the child to have a low moral development (Browne & Herbert, 1997). The lack of moral norms means that the child interprets what they see on the screen in an distorted way by evaluating characters and scenes immaturesly. However, Vine (1994) also points out that if individuals are susceptible to external triggers, such as violence on the screen, surely they will also be influenced by triggers away from the screen. “The real culprit is not what they see on the screen, but the deficiencies in how they have learned to interpret and evaluate media imagery” and, therefore, “protecting them from screen violence would again probably have only marginal effects on the overall incidence of their anti-social conduct” (Vine, 1994, p. 54).

MEDIA VIOLENCE, DELINQUENCY, AND CRIME

Research on media violence with young offenders has arisen as a result of the theory that they are a “vulnerable audience.” Certain factors have been repeatedly linked to delinquency and crime, such as poverty, one-parent families, and a lack of parental care and affection, coupled with inconsistent discipline (Browne & Herbert, 1997). These background characteristics have also been associated in making people susceptible to screen images (Vine, 1994).

A 1960's UNESCO review stated that television viewing is a contributory factor to delinquency and crime, but it is likely to affect only those children who are already maladjusted and prone to commit crimes. “In any of these cases, television by itself cannot make a normal, well-adjusted child into a delinquent.” Television was seen as dangerous from the point of view of an already aggressive child being able to gain hints of how to actually express their hostile feelings, rather than in terms of it being capable of making a non-aggressive child actually become aggressive (UNESCO, 1961, 1964).

Halloran, Brown, and Chaney (1970) conducted a study of individuals aged between 10 and 20 years to determine if there were any relationships between delinquency and the mass media. They took a sample of 334 probationers, 144 working class controls and 185 lower middle class controls. Controls were matched on age, sex, intelligence, and school attainment. Participants were interviewed to find out how important television was in their lives. The authors found that juvenile delinquents differed from controls in their viewing behavior. This difference was not due to the amount of television they watched or the actual programs viewed, but actually how they perceived and used the various programs. Delinquents were more interested in “exciting” programs, but were less able to say who they identified with on the screen.

The male probationers were mainly from working class families and often from a one parent family. They would be also more likely to show a lack of affection and greater emphasis on the “here-and-now.” The most important finding was that there was very little difference between the probationers and the working class controls, whereas the middle class children were noticeably different. It was concluded that the viewing behavior must be explained by the general social class background rather than narrowing it down to the behavior of a specific group of people who break the law.

Recent studies on young offenders have concentrated on those predisposed to being aggressive. Bailey (1993) investigated 40 adolescent murderers and 200 young sex offenders and claimed that repeated exposure to violent and pornographic videos was a significant factor in these crimes including in some cases actual imitation of the screen image. Bailey (1993) proposes that these individuals are lacking internal boundaries, driven by distorted
ideas and have unstable and violent feelings as well as deviant role models from real or fictional sources. Again this supports the suggestion that there is some maladjustment or abnormality which underlies and influences young offenders’ interpretations of screen images. This could again be linked to upbringing and family background to understand how this maladjustment materialized and stabilized. As some researchers have suggested, experiencing “real” violence in the home has a considerable effect on the predispositions to violence in the child (Browne, 1993; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990), which in turn could be reinforced by the violence on the screen. The question is, do children/adolescents with violent tendencies seek out violent films and if so do these films reinforce the already present aggressive behavior and cause that behavior to be acted out?

We have, therefore, come across the “chicken-and-egg dilemma,” which has been deliberated by several researchers. In longitudinal studies by Huesmann et al. (1984) and Huesmann and Eron (1986), they explored this issue and concluded that aggressive behavior at the age of 8 years did not predict violent television consumption 11 years later although the opposite idea of violent television predicting aggression was observed to be true.

A study completed by Hagell and Newburn (1994) revealed the viewing habits of young offenders and schoolchildren. Seventy eight offenders between the ages of 12 and 18 were compared with over 500 school children of a similar age. Despite the fact that the offenders had less access to television and video equipment, the two groups watched a similar amount of television. However, the offenders were no more likely to choose violent programs or films than the control group.

When asked to name their favorite films, both groups (for males) listed “Terminator 2” as their favorite. As for television programs, both liked soap operas and dramas, with the most popular program for offenders being a British police drama “The Bill” whereas the schoolboys and schoolgirls liked Australian soaps; “Home and Away” and “Neighbours,” respectively. Thus, it was concluded that the “viewing habits of the two groups were obviously very similar” and “that research on what people are watching needs to be supplemented with further work on how they are watching” (Hagell & Newburn, 1994; PSI Press Release, April 11, p. 2).

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The above review describes the main findings of the literature in this area (see Table 1), but it is also useful to assess the methodological approaches rather than accepting the published results per se. For this purpose, it is useful to divide the studies into groups based on the approaches used by the researchers.

Meta-analysis

This type of study has a major problem in that the results depend considerably on the studies being used as the data points. Obviously, if the methodology of the studies being collated is subject to question or vary, then this has a “knock-on” effect on the results of the overall meta-analysis.

Andison’s (1997) meta-analysis highlights the problems involved, but also shows how these findings are as accurate as possible despite the inherent problems of this type of investigations. This analysis had a systematic approach with strict criteria for choosing the studies included. This meant the studies did not have to be weighted on methodological sophistication. The number of participants included overall \( n = 30,000 \) meant that a
vast number of individuals and groups were represented in the results, so these could be generalized.

Generally in published studies, a bias exists towards those with significant results which would mean an over-representation of studies with positive results. However, Andison (1977) found that less than one in 20 of the studies actually said that viewing violence was beneficial for the viewer.

The fact that the studies were from a 20-year period could also mean that there is a time-series trend represented in the results. However, again, the author anticipates this problem and suggests that a difference in results could be due to the methods deployed by the various authors improving over time rather than being a time-series trend as initially suggested. Further analysis is needed to fully understand the complexities of the results.

Overall, this and the other meta analyses discussed appear to isolate the possible flaws associated with their designs and identify how these have been overcome to produce “fail-safe” results illustrating the negative effects of film violence.

**Laboratory Studies**

This method of studying human behavior has not been without criticism since its introduction. Whatever the area of study, people have argued that laboratory studies are artificial and unable to be generalized into real life situations. However, they have continued to be used because they allow a controllability of conditions, which is extremely hard to equal in the field setting.

Perhaps the most well-remembered laboratory studies in film violence is Bandura, Ross, and Ross’ (1963) “Bobo doll” experiments. These studies utilized direct observation methods by trained “blind” observers to show imitation of aggressive behavior by children. However, the published results have come under attack from those who feel that such a “novel” display of aggression could not be used as conclusive evidence on the effects of violence in the media (Cumberbatch, 1995). It was felt that the children involved knew that they had a role to fulfill for the researchers and behaved accordingly.

The other disparity between this laboratory study and real life is that in the study, children were given a chance to imitate the aggression immediately after viewing the role model, thus creating a very strong contingency between what they have just seen and being able to imitate the behavior, whereas children will usually go and play normally or do some other activity after watching television.

Following from this, another criticism of the realism of laboratory studies is that the measure of aggression used is very distinct from real life expressions of aggression. The main problem is that laboratory aggression is isolated from social contexts in which aggression arises and needs to be understood (Archer, 1989). One of the most common forms of laboratory aggression is the “supposed” giving of electric shocks, like in the studies of Berkowitz and Geen (1967). This is an extreme form of aggression relatively removed from that displayed in everyday life; yet, this seems to be accepted as evidence that following a violent film, people will act more aggressively.

How can such an artificial display be generalized at all? One way to circumvent this argument is to say that the actual measure of aggression is irrelevant as long as the intention to hurt someone is exhibited by the participant (Berkowitz & Donnerstein, 1982). If this is the case, then it could be suggested that aggressive acts in the laboratory involve the same emotions as those outside the laboratory; therefore, these studies provide good evidence which can be classed as ecologically valid. To fully achieve this, studies such as Bandura’s “Bobo Doll” experiments and those of Berkowitz and Geen, need to be supplemented with questions as to the meaning participants’ gave to their aggressive
acts. For all the authors know, children hitting the “Bobo dolls” (recorded as being aggressive and published as such) could well have been playing without being malicious. Without the underlying subjectivity of meaning, these objective observations give very little information as to the aggressive intent of the child involved.

The participants’ interpretations of what is expected of them and how they define the task can affect the generalization of results more than the experimental design (Bass & Firestone, 1980, cited in Berkowitz & Donnerstein, 1982). This could be problematic for studies like Bushman and Geen’s (1990), where they used psychology undergraduates as participants. These subjects may be more aware of the demands from the researchers and although, they were told that it was to do with media evaluation, they may still be trying to work out what is expected of them, which could influence the results gained. Having said this, Berkowitz and Donnerstein (1982) found that even if you manipulated what the participants understood about the study, this did not have an impact on their responses.

Laboratory studies give focused answers to some of the questions in the screen violence debate. However, although they can be utilized to demonstrate short-term effects, they are not as useful in discovering the long-term effects of frequent exposure (Berkowitz, 1989). This is where the research turns to the longitudinal approach, but again as in the above, the designs of even some of the most famous longitudinal research are open to question and scrutiny.

**Longitudinal Studies**

This type of study provides a very good source of investigating the cumulative effects of watching violent film and television. Some of the problems from this type of research come from the measures used, which is mainly reports of aggressive behavior and amount of television violence viewed. These reports are either self-reports or reports made by peers, parents or teachers. Lefkowitz et al. (1972) used parental reports of their child’s early television violence viewing which is not likely to provide an accurate picture as parents may believe that aggressive children prefer the more aggressive programs.

Singer and Singer (1981) were able to produce more valid results in their study as they used the observations of both mothers and trained observers. This meant they had two different types of observations to compare rather than basing their results on just one group’s recordings of behavior. From these findings they concluded that it was what the children were watching that made the difference rather than simply the amount of television in general being viewed.

Huesmann and Eron’s (1986) cross-national study had a sound design in that it took two accounts of participants’ aggression (self and peer) similar to Singer and Singer’s (1981) study, yet, it only relied on self-reports for television viewing, again bringing in a element for bias. Although, the authors tried to generalize their findings, there were differences between the different countries which did not fully come across in their findings. Cumberbatch (1995) suggested that the analysis carried out was not comprehensive enough without introducing third variables such as identification with characters, which was demonstrated in the Finnish study.

Milavsky et al. (1982) used self, parental, and teacher’s reports to enable the results to be placed into the home and classroom contexts. A problem which did occur in this study was that the attrition rate was high, which changed the composition of the sample from beginning to end. An important aspect to this study was that the authors controlled for the fact that children may not produce valid results in terms of the television programs they said they watched. They gave fictional titles to the participants and took out the children who claimed to have seen these non-existent films. They found that the correlation
they had recorded originally, decreased when the invalid responses were taken out (Cumberbatch, 1995). There is still debate among researchers about what the results of this study actually show.

Another problem with longitudinal research is that the results will vary depending on whether the study is completed retrospectively or prospectively. This can be seen in Lefkowitz et al.’s (1972) prospective study where the fact that a child is labeled aggressive may affect later recordings of violent television viewed. A retrospective approach also has important limitations.

Studies on Screen Violence and Delinquency

Belson (1978) used a retrospective design asking teenage males to recall television programs seen in their younger years. Here, there is the problem of recall bias where the participants may recall programs not representative of their overall viewing, or may simply forget the kinds of programs they used to watch. There is also the problem that Milavsky et al. (1982) encountered about the validity of recalling. Belson tried to claim that the responses were reliable, but just because they were consistently reported does not mean that valid responses were being given.

Belson collected data from a large sample \( n = 1,565 \); however, reports of aggression could have been biased as they were self-reported and relied on honesty from these male teenagers. Participants would have to be owning up to sensitive information such as “cutting people with razors or glass.” This may be something they would not freely admit to, depending on what they felt were the consequences of their admission. Unfortunately, despite assurances of confidentiality, honesty may not always be shown.

Bailey’s (1993) study on offenders has been criticized on similar grounds as it relied on self-reports through clinical interviews of young offenders and there was no control group for comparison. Finally, the work completed by Hagell and Newburn (1994) failed to take into account social class as a confounding factor, which would appear to be somewhat misleading considering the influence of this variable in the work of Halloran et al. (1970).

What the above has shown is that the research completed in this area is by no means flawless as is often the case when doing research on human participants. However, the contributions of the work in this field so far cannot be denied in terms of demonstrating that film and television violence has an effect on those who watch it, more often than not.

CONCLUSION

The work of Hagell and Newburn (1994) supports the contentions by Vine (1994) and Buckingham (1996) that there is a need to evaluate the role of mental representations and moral evaluation which may influence viewing behavior and its effects. Individual differences are perhaps, a reflection of not what is watched but rather what is remembered. It is important to determine what importance each scene has to an individual and the meaning they ascribe to it. Only then can we begin to understand how violent film and television influences violent behavior and who is most susceptible to such an influence.

The defense offered by film-makers that cutting violence from their films is destroying their art, fails to take account of the fact that many young people who watch films on video view the violent scenes devoid of the overall story. Rather than look at the whole film in real time, as one would do in the cinema, violent scenes may be played over repeatedly, freeze-framed, and nonviolent scenes fast-forwarded to the next violent epi-
sode. Thus, violent imagery may often be seen out of context and the consequences of such violence not observed. Further research can build on existing knowledge and begin to explore the effects of violent film observed “inappropriately.”

Perhaps an agenda for future research is to use a multimethod approach combining direct observation, indirect reports, and self-reports on the way people watch film, how they watch it, and what they understand and conclude from it. This would provide information on context, method, and interpretation of viewing violent film and television, respectively. A longitudinal perspective to this multimethod approach would ascertain changes in context, method, and interpretation with age and development. As direct observation can confirm the findings of indirect reports and self-reports, such studies would be less open to criticism and debate.

The availability of video film in the home environment has brought new dimensions to research on the effects of violence in the media. How different groups of individuals view video film and use it in the home environment may have important consequences for the way they perceive and understand the images presented and what they remember or imitate at a later time. The advent of interactive video and the concerns expressed about computer games, suggest that there is an urgent need to research and gain further knowledge of the effects of viewing violence, both real and artificial, in the home environment.

REFERENCES


