

MEDIA INFLUENCES ON PRO-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

"If violence on television causes people to be more aggressive, then shouldn't the good-hearted qualities on television cause its audience to be kinder to others?" (Cooke, 1993)

Whilst there are many studies looking at media influences on anti-social behaviour, there is much less research into whether the media can have positive effects on behaviour. Books aimed at children have traditionally carried pro-social messages, such as *Snow White* who looked after the seven dwarves and triumphed over the evil stepmother. However, because of its pervasive impact on our lives, psychological research has concentrated almost exclusively on the role played by TV.

Children most certainly are exposed to TV programming showing pro-social behaviour. For example, **Woodward (1999)** found that 77% of US TV programmes contained at least one pro-social behaviour (although it has to be acknowledged that only 4 of the top 20 TV programmes for under-17s contained any pro-social acts).



A television programme devised to increase pro-social behaviour

Most research has looked at media influences on *altruism* (helping someone else at a cost to the helper), the *development of empathy*, and the *reversal of gender and cultural stereotyping*, as well as other positive social skills including *helpfulness* and *generosity*.

For example, **Baron et al (1979)** randomly allocated children aged between seven and nine to watch one of three clips from *The Waltons*. The first group watched a clip showing co-operative behaviour. The second watched a clip with non-co-operative behaviour, and the third

watched a neutral clip. Following this, an accomplice of the experimenter walked past and dropped a pile of books. The researchers found that children who had watched the co-operative clip were quicker and more likely to help than those in the other two groups.



The ever-so-nice Walton family

In another study, **Rosenkoetter (1999)** studied a sample of American children aged between five and nine, and measured the amount of time they spent watching pro-social sitcoms (e.g. *The Cosby Show*). The childrens' parents were asked about how much helpful behaviour their children demonstrated. Rosenkoetter found a positive correlation between the two variables - children who watched more pro-social sitcoms showed higher levels of helpful behaviour.



The equally nice Cosbys

According to **Gunter & McAleer (1997)** research suggests that children do behave pro-socially following exposure to pro-social behaviour on TV. As they put it: *'Televised examples of good behaviour can encourage children to behave in friendlier and more thoughtful ways to others.'*

As with research into the media's influence on anti-social behaviour, several explanations have been proposed for the media's influence on PSB. Two of the most important ones are **Social Learning Theory** and **Cognitive Priming**.

Social Learning Theory as an explanation of pro-social behaviour

If anti-social behaviours are acquired through observational learning, it seems reasonable to propose that pro-social behaviours are also learned in this way. Thus, children learn by first observing a behaviour and then imitating it, provided that the expectation of reward is *greater* than the expectation of punishment.

All societies have established social norms (such as being generous and helpful to others). Assuming these norms have been internalised by the viewer, imitation of them is likely to be associated with the expectation of social reinforcement, so we are motivated to repeat them.

SLT is supported by several studies. For example, **Poulos et al (1975)** showed that young children who watched an episode of *Lassie*, where a child rescued a dog, were more likely to help puppies in distress than children who watched a neutral TV programme. This study is a one-shot exposure to a pro-social model study, and in this kind of study altruism is *explicitly* modelled. Like other studies, it shows that children will imitate altruism when it is explicitly modelled, and when they are shown the exact steps for pro-social behaviour.



Good old Lassie

Another study supporting SLT was conducted by **Johnston & Ettema (1982)**. Their study involved several thousand 9-12-year-old children. The children watched the TV series *Freestyle* (a programme designed to reduce sex role stereotypes) once a week for 13 weeks. They found that the children became less stereotyped or prejudiced in their attitudes and beliefs. However, this effect was increased when the programme was watched in the classroom and accompanied by teacher-led discussion and activities designed to expand on the issues shown in the TV programmes.

Unfortunately, research shows that exposure to filmed models has *less* of an effect than exposure to real-life models. Also, any positive effects tend to be relatively *short-lived*. Furthermore, when children have to generalise altruistic behaviour from a specific act seen in one context (the TV programme) to another context, the effect is much smaller. This is probably because they can remember concrete acts better than abstract acts. This has led to the claim that PSB in educational programming *only* seems to enhance similar behaviour *if* there are sufficient opportunities for producing such behaviour (and there may not be). As a result, the lack of generalisation therefore limits the overall effectiveness of pro-social messages on TV.

Of course, a behaviour can only be imitated if it has been noticed in the first place. One characteristic of many anti-social acts is that they have high impact value, whereas pro-social acts tend to be more subtle and therefore less memorable. An additional problem for young children arises when two segments of a story line are separated by adverts, and therefore lose some of their impact.

Finally, although children may imitate PSB they see on TV, they may be doing so for different reasons - young children may imitate PSB because they think they will gain a reward or avoid a punishment. Because adolescents are better able to understand the underlying principle of abstract pro-social messages, they may be more likely to act for genuinely altruistic reasons rather than to gain a reward or avoid a punishment.



Under certain circumstances, children may be positively influenced by the media

Cognitive Priming as an explanation for pro-social behaviour

According to **Berkowitz's (1984)** Cognitive Priming theory, pro-social behaviours in TV programmes can activate (or 'spark off') other pro-social thoughts in viewers through their association in memory pathways. Immediately after seeing an example of pro-social behaviour, the viewer is 'primed' to respond pro-socially because the memory network involving pro-social behaviour is activated. Frequent exposure to pro-social behaviour may lead children to store 'scripts' for pro-social behaviour in their memories, and these may be recalled in a later situation if any aspect of the original situation (even a superficial one) is present.

Holloway et al (1977) produced support for the cognitive priming effect of the impact of good news. They invited participants into their laboratory for an experiment. While they were sat in the waiting room, one group of participants listened to a positive news story played on a radio. The other group simply sat in the waiting room. All participants were told that they would be taking part in a study involving bargaining with another participant (who was actually a stooge). Those who had heard the positive news story were much more likely to be co-operative in their bargaining.

An additional study found that this was especially the case if the news story involved an account of someone who had *intentionally* given help. Note, though, that these findings only relate to *short-term effects* in *male* participants. However, since the participants' pro-social actions were different from those on the news story, the news story presumably activated (or primed) the participants when they were given the opportunity to behave pro-socially.

Blackman & Hornstein (1977) replicated Holloway et al's study, but also asked participants to rate their beliefs about human nature at the end of the investigation. Participants who had listened to the pro-social news report indicated they believed the world to have a higher proportion of decent and honest people than those who did not hear the report.

Other evaluative issues relating to both of these explanations

Many studies have been conducted under laboratory conditions, and allow the presentation of pro-social behaviour clearly and unambiguously using brief clips of people behaving pro-socially. Laboratory studies therefore have a high degree of **control**.

However, a problem with laboratory studies is that the psychological laboratory is an artificial situation, and generalising beyond the laboratory is difficult. This raises questions about the **ecological validity** of laboratory research. Another issue is that of **demand characteristics**. Even children may guess the purpose of a study and then bias their behaviour.

Whether a behaviour is pro-social or not can be difficult to decide. For example, many heroes and heroines on television (e.g. *Batman*) perform many pro-social acts (e.g. saving the world from nasty criminals), but are usually assessed by media researchers as representing violence and aggression. Much media research into both anti-social and pro-social behaviours fails to recognise the complexities of many such characters. Surely, a TV hero who kills a villain who was about to destroy the world is someone who has performed a pro-social behaviour rather than an anti-social one. According to **Gauntlett (1995)**: *"the content analysis approach and method is severely flawed by its inability to recognise the content or meaning of acts."*



Pro-social or anti-social behaviour?

Research also shows that young children are less able to recognise the emotional state of others and are less sure of how to help. This is because skills like empathy and recognising another person's emotional state develop from childhood to adolescence. Therefore, media portrayals of pro-social behaviour may be *irrelevant* for very young children if they do not understand the significance of what they are watching.

Furthermore, studies indicate that the effects of watching pro-social behaviour are greater in girls than boys, and in children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. This latter effect can be explained in terms of 'parental mediation', which is much more likely in children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Both Social Learning Theory and Cognitive Priming need to explain gender and class differences before we can

accept them as comprehensive explanations for media influences on pro-social behaviour.