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Television and the Family

An Emerging Area

GODFREY J. ELLIS
Oklahoma State University

Television has traditionally been studied from a variety of theoretical perspectives. These include "cultivation analysis" by Gerbner and his colleagues at the Annenberg School (see Signorielli et al., 1982), modeling and social learning theory, most notably by Bandura (1977), and some interesting new cognitive approaches (see Pearl et al., 1982b: 1-101). The overwhelming research area in the thousands of articles generated has been the topic of violence, specifically imitation (Pearl et al., 1982b: 103-157), blurring of reality, (Signorielli et al., 1982) and desensitization (Cline, 1974). There have been a variety of other topics of interest as well, including perceptions of reality, influence of commercials, uses and gratifications, and creativity and imagination in children, (see Murray, 1980, and Pearl et al., 1982b, for literature in these areas).

Although investigators have been interested in the topic of television and families (at least as a context for effects on children) from the very inception of television (for example, Maccoby, 1951), theory and research in this specific area has been surprisingly limited. In Comstock and colleagues' (1978) encyclopedic discussion of television and human behavior, for example, the topic of family does not even have its own heading in the index. Murray's (1980) comprehensive and excellent bibliography of twenty-five years of television research has no section on television and the family per se. And, in the significantly titled book, *Television and Social Behavior: Beyond Violence and Children* (Withey and Abeles, 1980), there are no chapters dealing with television and the family. Even when researchers claim to have a "family orientation," they often mean that the child-

ren they are studying happen to live in family units. With a few notable exceptions (for example, Chaffee et al., 1971), literature on television and the family has been limited to speculation and advice to parents. The dearth of literature in this area may be partly due to a history of researching television from a limited psychological and individualistic perspective.

There is some evidence that this situation is beginning to change. The recent Surgeon General's reports contain some good chapters on both the portrayal of family on television and television's effects on families (see Pearl et al., 1982a, 1982b). A number of recent articles deal with such topics as family mediation of television (Lull, 1980), family tension (Rosenblatt and Cunningham, 1976), and relationships in the family (Brody et al., 1980). However, there still appears to be very little attention paid to the portrayal of families on television and the effects of television on relationships within the family and on the family as a holistic system.

This lacuna seems unfortunate. Television is clearly an area of critical importance to families and, consequently, to those who study them. The television is turned on over seven hours of every day in the average American family (Comstock et al., 1978: 89) and the average family member is estimated to spend almost ten years of his or her life watching television. More families own televisions (over 98%) than have indoor plumbing. Our own sample of Oklahoma families indicates that three-quarters of all families own more than one set (Ellis et al., 1983), implying isolated viewing (Comstock et al., 1976: 157).

It was this need for research and theory in the area of television and the family that formed the basis for the idea of a special issue of *Journal of Family Issues*. There seemed to be need in this cross-disciplinary area for more involvement by family sociologists, family-oriented psychologists, home economists, and famologists. Likewise, there appeared to be need for more child psychologists and journalism/broadcasting researchers to adopt the family as a relevant area of investigation. The journal seemed an excellent forum for encouraging such interdisciplinary growth.

By 1980, plans for this theme issue were under way. In 1981, we organized a panel at the annual meetings of the NCFR entitled, "Television and Intrafamilial Relationships: Theoretical and Methodological Concerns in an Emerging Area of Investigation." At the

1982 meetings, interested researchers presented papers and organized roundtables and poster sessions.

The objective of this theme issue became twofold: (1) to demonstrate to the readership of the *Journal of Family Issues* the feasibility and desirability of research in this family-related area, and (2) to continue the networking of the relatively small nucleus of researchers interested in family and television.

The resulting issue of the *Journal of Family Issues* offers a wide variety of largely theoretical articles that break new ground in approaching the topic of television and the family. Emerging theoretical formulations include observational approaches (see the articles by Messaris, and Bryce and Leichter), a "contextualist framework" (see Brody and Stoneman; tested by Stoneman and Brody), a symbolic interactionist perspective (see Davis and Abelman, Ellis et al.), and systems theory (see the article by Goodman). These articles should provide the reader with much food for thought.

With newly emerging television technologies such as video-cartridge or video-disk capabilities, expanding cable services, and sophisticated home computers and video games (see Williams, 1982, for an excellent discussion), the impact of television as a member of the family is a question that will be receiving greater and greater attention. It is not unreasonable to speculate that the relationship of television and families will represent one of the more important questions to be addressed in the 1980s. It is hoped that this theme issue will serve as a modest beginning toward addressing this question.

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Godfrey J. Ellis is Associate Professor of Family Relations and Child Development
and Faculty Associate of the Family Study Center at Oklahoma State University in
Stillwater, Oklahoma. His research interests center on television and the family,
parent-child interaction, and comparative family analysis. He is currently serving as
guest editor of a special issue of Youth and Society entitled, "Youth in the Electronic
Environment," which is scheduled to appear in September 1983.