

The Lull of Tradition: A Grounded Theory Study of Television Violence, Children and Social Work

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ABSTRACT: This article results from a study of television violence and social work practice with children. Twenty-one social workers who work primarily with children in schools, in community mental health agencies and in private practice were interviewed. A qualitative analysis using grounded theory indicates that social workers do little to elicit television content or information about children's television viewing. They do not believe that television experiences are central to their work. Although social workers express concern about the influence of television violence on children, their traditional beliefs in cause and effect, values neutrality, and gender lead many to minimize its importance.

The process of interpretation in social work takes place within a world of complexity and ambiguity. Social workers, like all people, order their world through practices based on assumption, belief and tradition. The tacit knowledge social workers bring to their encounters with children come not only from prior practice experience but from personal knowledge constructed from the values and norms of their culture (Dean, 1989).

For most Americans a pervasive television presence is a routine feature of daily life, a norm. Television has been called a "guest" (Pal-

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mer, Hockett & Dean, 1983) and a "member" (Ellis, Streeter & Engelbrecht, 1983) of today's family. Whether houseguest or household member, it educates and entertains children with stories about our culture, stories peppered with violence. How then, do social workers who know and work with children interpret and order the importance of these stories?

This paper is based on a study of twenty-one social workers who work primarily with children in private practice, clinic, and school settings. Grounded theory methods of analysis were utilized to analyze interviews which ranged from one to two hours. A three stage process of coding—open, selective and axial—was used as explicated by Strauss and Corbin (1990). All social workers were asked to give detailed descriptions of drawing, play, or conversation with children where themes of television violence had emerged. The fifty-one stories collected provided a basis for considering not only the incidence of television violence in practice with children, but also the meaning of television violence to social workers (Lazar, 1996). Lastly, the study sought to explain how and why social workers generally disregard the influence of television and media on the children they see.

A History of Neglect

Social workers are troubled by their knowledge of children's exposure to television violence yet they do not generally raise their concern with colleagues, with parents, or with children. This stance is consistent with societal neglect. Efforts to decrease children's exposure to violence on television are not a priority for social workers and not a priority for society (Eron & Huesmann, 1987; Minow, 1995). Attempts to create regulatory policy to protect children from a marketplace that sells violence have been largely unsuccessful. Such attempts have a long history (Kunkel, 1988; Kunkel & Watkins, 1987).

In 1954, soon after the introduction of television into the American home, Senator Estes Kefauver, chairman of the subcommittee on juvenile delinquency, worried about children's exposure to "crime, horror, sadism and sex" (Minow, 1995 p. 42). Kefauver was not the only one worried. Parents and child development experts were increasingly concerned. Yet more than 30 years of research, congressional debate and broadcaster promises to reduce the level of violence on television have failed to bring significant change (Palmer, 1988). A recent report of the National Study Violence Council (1994–1995)

concludes that, "The world of television is not only violent—it also consistently sanctions its violence" (p. 4). There are often no consequences to victims. Perpetrators go unpunished, and anti-violence messages are rare.

Pervasive violence on television, and its endorsement, are particularly important because the weight of scientific evidence supports the conclusion that exposure increases children's "likelihood of subsequent aggression or anti-social behavior" (Comstock & Strasburger 1990 p.32). But "increasing the likelihood" has provided insufficient grounds for social policy change (Feshback, 1988). The broadcast industry has demanded proof of harm. It has argued that television's influence on children is minimal, while spending billions of dollars to influence them (Singer & Singer 1988). Levin and Carlsson-Paige (1994) state that the lack of responsible social policy has created a "deep-seated undermining of healthy development and play in a climate in which children's needs were of less importance than profits for business" (p.38). They suggest that what children watch on television is best measured against their psychosocial needs. If, indeed, need were substituted for harm in the national debate, a developmental framework could supplant the medical damage framework and social workers would be in a better position to align their concern with action.

Between Concern and Action

Social workers in this study recognized television viewing to be an activity that engages most children much of the time. "Television is a huge part of children's lives," one social worker concluded. They explained that television material is part of children's everyday communication. As one social worker stated, "Children just talk and its [television] what they talk about. Its their everyday talk about what's going on in their world." Social workers identified and described television-related violence in children's play, drawing, and conversation. They reflected that television conveys cultural messages and that certain children are more vulnerable to those of violence. They expressed concern that television violence promotes aggression and desensitization. However, these social workers generally did not consider children's exposure to violence on television as grounds for social work intervention.

There was a marked difference between awareness of, and invest-

ment in, exploring television violence in the lives of child clients. Most social workers did not look for, or think about, television violence when working with children. As one social worker stated, "As I'm gathering background information it's not something I usually think to ask." Another worker, referring to violence on television, put it this way, "You know, that hasn't been as much a part of my thinking as family issues." Social workers did not seem to believe that television violence was a worthy enough contender among the many factors that vied for their attention. How did social workers arrive at this determination?

While time pressure was the reason cited by some for their inattention, the more frequently heard explanation was that television experiences were not as important as other experiences in a child's life. Although social workers expressed numerous concerns about the influence of television violence on children, they did not tend to translate these concerns into action. The gulf between concern and action has its roots in three orientations: (a) cause and effect thinking; (b) gender conformity; and (c) values neutrality.

Cause and Effect Thinking

The first, cause and effect thinking, is represented in the belief that violence on television is not the cause of children's problems, and the belief that action should be based on a direct link between stimulus and effect. Most of the social workers explained that they did not attend to television in the lives of their clients either because it was not the cause of the child's problem or they did not see a direct link between television viewing and specific behaviors.

Social workers in this study said they were looking for the "source," the "cause," or the "pressure issue," and that television violence was none of these. The first subject interviewed predicted correctly that other social workers, like herself, would not attend to television violence. She stated, "It is an adjunctive issue. It is something that affects the kids that we see but isn't a causative agent." This view was also held by parents who rarely identified television violence as related to a child's difficulties. Another social worker stated, "I mean no one brings their child in because TV has made them behave in a certain way."

Though this study did not attempt to explore the factors leading social workers to focus narrowly on the cause of children's problems,

time pressures, numbers of cases, and managed care were noted as constraints. These very real pressures to “fix” children may have contributed to a reductionistic approach. When social workers looked for the cause of children’s problems, they frequently focused on the family. Television violence, when considered, was regarded as an exacerbating factor, not a cause of children’s difficulties. Therefore, most social workers did not actively explore the place of television within the family constellation, and television viewing as a family dynamic was largely unacknowledged.

Many social workers in this study explained that they did not consider children’s exposure to violence on television, because they did not often see a direct link between viewing and behavior. The words “direct link,” “direct reference,” “cause and effect,” and “resulted in” appeared throughout the interviews. Some social workers disregarded television violence unless children themselves identified a connection between their behavior and a specific television program. One school social worker put it this way:

I certainly have not had a child coming in to say to me, “Boy, I whacked Tommy today and I was thinking about it. It was just like Arnold Schwarzenegger did.” I can’t say that I have direct knowledge about that link. I don’t often hear the direct correlation from a child between “this is what I saw” and “this is what I do.”

Social workers did notice violent themes and characters in children’s play, drawing, and conversation, but only paid attention when they identified a negative effect, e.g., the child who couldn’t sleep at night after watching a Freddie Krueger movie, the child who stabbed a doll after seeing *Child’s Play*, the child who couldn’t emerge from the role of a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, or the child who injured another while playing Power Rangers on the playground.

A negative effect was the marker, or “red flag,” which alerted social workers to regard television exposure, and in some circumstances the negative effect had to be big enough to draw attention from competing harm. For those absorbed with “messes” and “day to day traumatic episodes” a negative effects orientation could enable them to focus on what one worker called “the elemental things.” While negative effects are certainly cause for concern, this orientation fails to elucidate the meaning of a steady exposure to violence for most children. It renders invisible an important activity in children’s lives.

Gender Conformity

Social workers' thinking about television violence, and what they do about it, is related to whether children are boys or girls. Children's television expressions are viewed within the context of what is considered typical for male and female children. Because boys commonly present themes of television-related violence in drawing, play, and conversation, social workers overlook such expressions. Because girls commonly do not present television-related violence (or it goes unrecognized), social workers overlook exposure.

Of the 51 stories told about children only five were about girls. Social workers' experience with girls and television violence is different than their experience with boys. The stories of girls and television violence focus primarily on fear. Four of the stories told were about fear reactions and social workers' interventions with parents. The focus of intervention was on helping parents understand their daughters' need for protection. Although the subjects recognized that for some parents the recommendation to modify television use represented a major change, they offered specific advice about modification and monitoring.

Social workers may have obvious reasons to intervene when a child is expressing intense fear. What about other girls who may not be expressing such fear? Is it fair to assume that they are not watching violence, or are not influenced? Are girls immune to television violence and horror? What meaning do girls make of the countless incidents of violence they witness on television? Social workers perceive that some boys are swayed by powerful cultural messages to be, as one social worker stated, "strong, powerful and conquering." However, they do not know how girls are swayed by messages not intended for them, or how girls respond to being more frequently cast in the role of victim or conquered.

One social worker placed her neglect within the larger cultural context in which girls' experiences are marginalized. Toward the end of the interview she recognized that she had fallen into the "socialization booby trap" which she explained this way:

The booby trap being that if girls are silent about it or don't betray it in their behavior, then we make the false deduction that they are alright. Obviously we are discovering that that's not true . . . I mean, it would concern me if in fact, we are not being vigilant about what girls are exposed to and what meaning they take from the violence if all that does is exacerbate their vulnerability.

Social workers explained that they frequently noticed television-related violence in boys' play, drawing, and talk. Boys were presented as being drawn to violence. The words, "enamored," "in love with," and "love," were all used to describe the attraction. Social workers observed that some boys identified with television characters and practiced the lessons they learned from their heroes. These were boys who had witnessed domestic violence, been abandoned by one or both parents, been abused, or diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder or other disabilities. Unlike the girls who came to social workers' attention, most of the boys were referred because of impulsivity and aggression.

Social workers said that they were especially concerned about the influence of television violence on two groups of children: those who were abused and those who were aggressive. Yet, most intervened on behalf of the former and only when they thought a child had been frightened by exposure to violence on television. For many, inquiry was a consideration for boys only when there was a known history of abuse.

Although some social workers believed that boys' fascination with violence and horror was "counterphobic," this view did not seem to lead to intervention. They described hearing different messages about violence on television from boys and girls. The message from boys was that they liked what they saw. In several instances, when social workers attempted to explore the topic of television violence, boys expressed anger at the interference. One school social worker who shared her opinion about television violence was told, "I'd kill you if you were my mother." Social workers who do not proactively explore television use with boys may be influenced by these children's expectable gendered response to television violence. Reactions to violence and horror on television are to a large extent culturally prescribed. By school-age boys and girls are measuring themselves against societal norms. Girls can express vulnerability without risk of derision, while boys cannot. Social workers explained that boys are drawn to violence as a solution to feelings of helplessness, which they have learned to mask. One social worker described the feelings of a 10-year-old boy she described as a "TV junky" who watched a great deal of violence and Freddie Krueger-type movies: "Typically, he would say that he was not frightened, that he found it enjoyable . . . Although, I think that underneath he felt very vulnerable and scared." Another, speaking of an eight-year-old boy with a history of family violence, explained his fascination with horror movies this way, "I think again

it was his wanting to be able to protect himself and identify with the aggressor so he could protect himself from being hurt.”

Both boys and girls make meaning of what they see on television. Children craft their meaning within the context of their beliefs about how the world should be. Within that context social workers may be lulled into accepting the way things are, i.e., girls do not generally incorporate themes of violence in their play, drawing, and talk so they are not asked and boys often incorporate themes of violence in their play, drawing, and talk so they are not asked. There is nothing unusual about boys' interest and girls' apparent disinterest in violence. Violent content in boys' talk, play, and drawing is considered typical. It is only when a child's behavior goes beyond what social workers think of as normal that their attention is captured.

When programs on television geared for boys rely on violence as the primary solution to conflict, a boy's "normal" preference for violence may be shaped by what he believes his preference should be. That children present television material to social workers in ways that conform to gender stereotypes, (girls afraid and boys enthralled) is not surprising. Behavior that fits within what is expectable for boys and girls may, if not unnoticed, go unchallenged. Gender conformity may then lead social workers to fall into either of the socialization "booby traps." The result is that social workers do not initiate exploration of television experience with most girls or with most boys.

Values Neutrality

The decision to explore television violence is, in part, a matter of values. Does the social worker believe that exposure to violence on television is harmful to children? Should children be exposed to recurrent violence on television? If social workers do believe that exposure is potentially bad for children do they intervene? In other words, do social workers rely on their value judgements to inform practice? If they do not, what constraining beliefs keep them from acting upon their values?

Values: A Difference

All the social workers were concerned about what children watched on television. Two common concerns were that many children who lacked supervision were viewing material that was inappropriate for their developmental level, and that children were learning ways of

problem-solving which emphasized that "might makes right." In addition to general concerns for all children, social workers expressed increased concern for certain children. Many of those identified as being most "at risk" were children who social workers routinely saw in their practices. They were children who had suffered trauma, who had difficulty with aggression and impulsivity, and who were unsupervised at home. A number of social workers explained that although they did not believe a steady diet of violence was good for any child, the children they saw were more vulnerable. Poverty and parental stress were commonly identified as contributing factors.

Whether children watched violence because parents were uninvolved or because parents did not disapprove, social workers believed that such exposure was not good for children. Yet, many social workers explained that violence on television was not something they commonly asked about. They noticed and responded to children's television-related expressions of violence in the moment, but most did not initiate discussion with children or parents. The majority of subjects in this study did not ask questions about what children watched on television unless it "popped up" in a way that alarmed them or somebody else.

This lack of exploration is grounded in a cause and effects perspective and gender conformity. It is also consistent with the belief that social workers should not impose their values on clients. The words "impose," "soapbox," and "preach" were all used to describe the choice not to consider television a legitimate area for inquiry and intervention. Social workers noted that some children were exposed to violence on television because parents lacked knowledge or resources. Other children were exposed because parents were negligent, or approved of viewing violence. The social workers presumed that raising the issue of what children watched on television might lead to a conflict of values. Most social workers anticipated a difference in values between themselves and parents in regard to what children were allowed to watch. For the majority, the story ended there. The importance of not imposing values superseded their concern about television violence. They worried that to raise questions was to judge. One social worker explained that while he was hesitant to raise the topic, what he would have liked to say to the parent after a child had watched something very violent was, "You ninny, what could you have possibly been thinking?" Some social workers managed their discomfort by avoiding dialogue.

Social workers were also concerned about parents' discomfort.

Would parents feel threatened or judged? While these social workers may have risked discomfort, either their own or their client's, if they had perceived that a child was in danger, they chose to avoid conflict otherwise. These social workers expressed a desire not to be seen as agents of social control, i.e., not, as one social worker stated, "to preach morality." This was particularly so for school social workers who were often in the front line of identifying abuse and neglect. One school social worker explained that at times she wanted to tell parents that what a child had seen on television was "inappropriate," but refrained because she did not want to appear to be investigating.

Many social workers taught non-violent conflict resolution skills to promote safety in schools. In some schools, however, social workers identified a significant values difference between themselves and parents, who justified violence as a legitimate way to resolve problems. When social workers were faced with such a significant difference of values, they were reluctant to open yet another area of potential conflict with parents. As one worker explained, "I'm trying to work with the kids to teach them other lessons but they are going home and parents are saying, 'Don't let anybody mess with you—punch their lights out.'" Another stated, "We have parents who literally send their kids to school with instructions like, 'If Theresa lays one hand on you again, you punch her in the face and tell her your mother said so.'"

The attribution of "values difference" has ramifications for practice with children and parents. In work with both it may mean ignoring an area of concern in an effort to maintain the desired values neutrality. The belief that one can separate one's values from professional practice is, after all, common in social work education and practice. One social worker stated, "I have my own personal feelings about what I do in my own home. I don't feel I should be imposing that on my clients." Another said, "I try to get away from undermining what their parents values are and not battle with that." For some social workers the wish not to impose their own values, especially in an area where they anticipate no gain, may lead to identifying television viewing as a "family difference." When that difference is perceived to be one of values, the risk of losing neutrality and a potential alliance with parents is greater than the perceived risk to children. For this group the ethical tension remains in the background.

Values and the Home/Work Coincidence

The loss of values-neutrality may be particularly salient because television viewing is a common cultural experience. All social workers

have televisions in their homes. They watch television, most grew up watching television, their family members watch television, and they struggle with television use in their own homes. Seventeen out of twenty-one social workers brought up their own television experiences when answering questions about work with clients. One of the four social workers who did not bring up their own experience prior to being asked had a baby, and three had no children living at home.

When asked if they had concerns about children and television violence within their practice settings many spoke both as social workers and parents. The phrase, "as a social worker and as a parent" was common. However, it was not only those with children at home who introduced their own experience with television before being asked. One social worker spoke of his grandchildren, another of her sister's children and several talked about themselves. The social workers, particularly parents, easily slipped into personal experience when asked about the professional. As one social worker stated "television is everybody's gossip." The everyday ordinariness of television suggests that taking a values-neutral position is a strategy for avoiding role confusion, particularly between parenting and social work roles.

Social workers who are parents worried about television's influence on their own children. They monitored and mediated what their children watched. The efforts taken by some social workers to mitigate the effects of television for their children were in sharp contrast to the lack of attention given to television for their clients. One social worker who did not ask about television, even when it came up, described her own intervention with her ten-month-old daughter, "I always put a book up to block the TV from her view while I'm giving her a night-time bottle."

Another social worker who generally did not initiate an exploration of television violence described his response to his own son's aggressive behavior. In his role as father this social worker did not need proof that viewing violence caused aggression in order to intervene; he used his common sense. In regard to his own son he was not constrained by neutrality.

There was a time when my son, who is now nine, was involved in some aggressive play. Not unusual, but enough to say, "Wait a minute, this isn't the way that it is okay for you to be acting." And at that point I limited him from watching any kind of aggression on TV. I know it had a powerful effect on him . . .

There may be a difference of values between social workers and clients but there is also sameness. Like many parents, social workers

sometimes used television to keep children occupied, did not know what children were watching, and did not anticipate children's reactions. Several social workers told stories about allowing children to see frightening movies because they hadn't previewed the movie or misjudged its appropriateness.

Thinking about a family's use of television as reflective of different values may mask similarities between clients and social workers. Most Americans are accustomed to regarding television as a diversion. While social workers may possess greater knowledge of child development and increased skills in responding to children, they are motivated to use television for some of the very same reasons that other parents use television. When there is both sameness and difference between social workers and clients, a choice to emphasize the difference is one way to maintain professional distance and maintain neutrality.

Discussion

The misalignment between social workers' concerns and their inattention to television violence in practice is related to the traditional belief that social workers cannot, or should not, introduce their own values in practice. From social work's traditional perspective it is both possible and desirable to set values and moral judgement aside, out of the view of clients. This presupposes that there is such a thing as values neutrality, a neutrality Rhodes (1986) calls "illusion" (p. 92) and Freud characterizes as "self-deception" (1987, p. 119). Many of the social workers in this study were hesitant to introduce a discussion of television for fear this would be interpreted by clients as moralizing. Yet some in the profession believe that meaningful moral dialogue can take place within practice and that even silence expresses a moral position, one that maintains the status quo (Freud, 1987; Swenson, 1995).

In the case of television the status quo perspective is that children watch what they watch because parents let them. Although the television industry has defined watching or not watching television a matter of parental choice, it is not so simple. Although parents have a duty to protect their children, it is not practical to expect parents to successfully screen children's programs all of the time. The constant demands of parenting for some and survival for others, coupled with a lack of good quality alternative programming, make this unlikely.

Additionally, some parents have become used to the level of violence that is a consistent feature of American commercial television. Some parents are desensitized, and attracted to violence themselves. Institutionalized violence, like institutionalized racism, blends into the fabric of everyday life. People do not often recognize that they have a choice to challenge the dominant culture.

What social workers observe in practice is not only a matter of individual parental choice. It is a reflection of what our culture makes presentable and acceptable. It is a reflection of the United States' long-standing fascination with weapons and violence (Shacter & Seinfeld, 1994). It is also a reflection of the dominant social construction of gender. Maleness defined as fearlessness, love of a fight, and detachment, fills the television screen in many households. Yet violence on television, a cultural influence which social workers acknowledge contributes to aggression, is not routinely a part of assessment and intervention even when children are referred for problems with aggression.

Social workers believe that exposure to violence on television is exacerbating, aggravating, and exaggerating but does not cause children's problems. One of the most basic assumptions of a positivist epistemology of practice is that cause and effect are related in a linear fashion. Because the risk factors for violent behavior are so complex and interrelated, a belief in the importance of a primary causal connection creates a framework for understanding that eliminates television violence.

The majority of social workers do not consider that traditional cause and effect thinking limits the scope of their understanding and dilutes their concern. It is no coincidence that in the United States an emphasis on finding a causal connection between exposure to television violence and negative effects has dominated our national policy, limited our understanding and diluted our concern.

The discrepancy between what social workers believe is best for children and their inaction can be called the "lull of tradition." Social workers are concerned that children's attitudes and behaviors are shaped by their exposure to violence on television. Specifically, they worry that children learn it is acceptable to hurt others, and that it is an acceptable means of solving problems. Furthermore, some worry that constant exposure interferes with the development of empathy. Yet, traditional perspectives on the separation of personal and professional values, gender, and the linear relationship between cause and effect serve to lull social workers, in much the same way that society

has been lulled, into accepting a steady stream of violence in our homes.

Conclusion

Social workers are aware that children, some more than others, integrate violence witnessed on television in their lives. When social workers do not act on that awareness they contribute to the creation of a world where violence, unless extreme, is ignored. Violence on television, movies, and videogames is common, ordinary, and taken-for-granted. Social workers can begin through dialogue with others (other social workers, other professionals, parents and children) to make the ordinary apparent. Television, a standard feature in children's lives, may then become a standard feature in social work practice with children.

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