Direct and Indirect Aggression on Prime-Time Network Television

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This study examined the prevalence of 3 types of aggression on prime-time television during the spring of 2005. Verbal aggression was found to be the most prevalent, followed by indirect and physical. Physical aggression appeared more frequently among Caucasians and males. Female characters were more involved in indirect aggression, while verbal aggression was sex neutral. In general, minority racial and ethnic groups were found to be less aggressive than Caucasians. Depictions of cross-sex and cross-cultural aggression seemed relatively balanced. Social learning implications of the findings are discussed.

The daily news is filled with stories of conflict. And our TV sitcom “entertainment” is almost always based on conflict and people who handle it poorly. In fact much of the so-called “humor” in those sitcoms is nothing more than a series of destructive, damaging putdowns. As a result, I don’t watch much of it.

—Dr. Alan Zimmerman (2006), motivational speaker

Many Americans may not possess the same restraint, or perhaps awareness, as Dr. Zimmerman. According to Nielsen Media Research, the average American spent about 4.5 hours per day, and the average household over 8 hours per day, watching television during the 2004–05 season (Consoli, 2005). If television programming is indeed replete with the kind of depictions referred to above, there may well be cause for concern.

Beginning in the 1960s not long after the advent of television, researchers have examined television violence and its effect on viewers. Other forms of aggression, such as indirect or verbal, have received relatively scant attention, perhaps because of the more overt nature of physical aggression and its demonstratable effect on children (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963a). However, the impact of these more subtle forms of aggression may be even more long lasting and harmful than those of physical aggression. An example would be the child who is teased (verbal aggression)
about his/her physical appearance and then suffers a lifetime of psychological repercussions (Infante & Wigley, 1986).

Theoretically the media, especially television, have been shown to be an important source for learning behaviors and cultivating viewers’ attitudes and perceptions. According to social learning/social cognitive theory, behaviors modeled on television such as aggression are learned by viewers, particularly when the aggression is rewarded, as is often the case on television (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Potter & Ware, 1987). Gerbner’s cultivation theory posits that television cultivates a TV view of reality, especially among heavy viewers (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). So, for example, heavy viewers of television and its plethora of violence are more likely to perceive the real world as a more dangerous place than lighter viewers (Gerbner et al., 2002). Short-term effects of exposure to violent depictions are accounted for by Berkowitz’s priming process, which posits that observed aggression activates certain aggressive scripts or schemas in one’s memory, thereby making their subsequent utilization more likely, (Berkowitz, 1984).

Considering the recent emergence of new programming formats during prime-time network television such as news magazine and reality shows, as well as the relative omission of verbal and indirect aggression in previous studies, the intent of this study is to examine aggressive behavior, in its various forms, on prime-time network television. Hopefully this will contribute to a greater awareness of the overall extent of televised aggression and the potential cumulative effect on viewers.

**Literature Review**

A useful topology for studying aggression in the media is suggested by Coyne and Archer (2004) who distinguish between direct (verbal and physical) and indirect forms of aggression, the primary difference being that direct aggression is face-to-face while indirect is typically carried out behind the target’s back. In studies of aggression in real life, researchers have consistently found men to be more directly aggressive than females (Richardson & Green, 1999). Research on indirect aggression has been less conclusive; however studies finding differences have reported more prevalence among females than males (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2004; Osterman et al., 1998).

**Verbal Aggression**

Infante and Rancer (1996) define verbal aggression as an attack on the self-concept of another in order to inflict psychological pain, which could include depression, humiliation, or other negative feelings. Examples of verbal aggression include insults, yelling or arguing, threats, sarcasm and name calling (Coyne & Archer, 2004; Infante & Wigley, 1986). Infante and his colleagues have proposed a model in which verbal aggression serves as a precursor to physical violence (Infante,
In a study designed to demonstrate this relationship, Infante et al. found that people involved in physically abusive relationships were also more likely to report using verbal aggression.

One obvious place verbal aggression may be learned is the media. When researchers have accounted for verbal aggression in content analyses of the media (which has not been very often), it has been found in relatively large quantities. For example, Greenberg, Edison, Korzenny, Fernandez-Collado, and Atkin (1980) examined verbal aggression, defined as hostility, rejection or threats, during prime-time network programming from 1975 to 1978 and found from 19 to 25 verbally aggressive instances per hour, about twice that of physical aggression. While no sex differences were reported, situation comedies contained the most verbal aggression. Comparable findings were reported by Glascock (2001) with acts of verbal aggression (15 per show) more than doubling those of physical aggression (6 per show). In a longitudinal study (1950–2000), Scharrer (2001) found an increase in the number of verbal putdowns of the sitcom father by the sitcom mother. Scharrer (2001) also found that the total number of putdowns between the sitcom mother and father to have increased over the time period examined. Given the relationship previously found between sitcoms and verbal aggression, this would indicate that over the years verbal aggression may have increased during prime time.

Research into the effects of verbally aggressive depictions in the media has focused on rap and heavy metal music, genres that have been criticized for their sexually violent lyrics (Ballard & Coates, 1995; Barongan & Hall, 1995; Rubin, West, & Mitchell, 2001; St. Lawrence & Joyner, 1991). Listening to violent rock music has been found to increase subjects’ hostility and aggressive thoughts (Anderson, Carnagey, & Eubanks, 2003) as well as males’ sex role stereotyping and negative attitudes toward women (St. Lawrence & Joyner, 1991). For rap music, in which the lyrics are typically the central focus and easier to understand than rock, researchers have found exposure to increase sexually aggressive behavior (Barongan & Hall, 1995) as well as adversarial sex beliefs (Wester, Crown, Quatman, & Heesacker, 1997). Rubin et al. found a positive relationship between both rap and heavy metal music listeners and aggressive attitudes. Studies outside the music realm include one by Berkowitz (1970) who found a priming effect for “hostile humor” on subjects’ subsequent aggressive behavior.

Indirect Aggression

Another form of aggression is indirect, which involves “harm delivered circuitously, often with the aggressor remaining anonymous” (Richardson & Green, 1999, p. 425). Indirect aggression refers to indirect ways of harming others, either verbal or physical, typically behind the victim’s back (Coyne et al., 2004). Examples of indirect aggression include gossiping, spreading rumors, ignoring, or destroying someone’s property behind their back (Coyne & Archer, 2004).
While direct aggression is usually initiated more by males in the real world, studies of indirect aggression have shown that, when sex differences are found, the aggression tends to be initiated more by females (Coyne et al., 2004; Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003; Osterman et al., 1998; Richardson & Green, 1999). Bjorkqvist (1994) argues that such sex differences have developed through an evolutionary learning process. Since males have traditionally been physically stronger than females, females learn early in life the avoidance of physical aggression and the adoption of indirect aggression, for which the threat of retaliation is less since the target is typically not present or unaware.

As is the case for verbal aggression, studies of indirect aggression in the media are in short supply. Coyne and Archer (2004) examined popular British children’s television programming and found almost all the episodes (92%) contained at least one instance of indirect aggression, which occurred on average about 9 times per hour. In addition female characters were rated as more indirectly aggressive than males.

Studies of indirect aggression effects have also been limited. Paquette and Underwood (1999) found that female victims of social aggression, a concept similar to indirect aggression, reported lower perceptions of their own physical appearance, romantic appeal, and self-worth. In line with social learning theory and priming, Coyne et al. (2004) found that viewers of indirect aggression tended to respond indirectly when given a subsequent opportunity to aggress.

**Physical Aggression**

The prevalence and effects of the depiction of physical aggression on television have been documented almost since the dawn of television. Gerbner and his associates began counting the number of violent acts on television in the early 1970s and found about 5 acts per hour in prime time (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), with minorities and women more likely to be victims of violence than aggressors (Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffres-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978). More recently Signorielli (2003) reported similar numbers (about 5 acts per show, 60% of shows with violence) for 1990s prime-time programming. Signorielli (2003) also found males more likely than females to both commit and be victims of violence, but no such differences between Caucasians and minorities.

Bandura’s studies in the early 1960s, in which children were found to imitate cartoon-like and real-life televised violence, provided initial support for the link between TV violence and real-world aggression (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963a; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963b). Since then literally hundreds of studies have been done on the topic, with most of the findings supporting a causal connection between media violence and violence in society (Sparks & Sparks, 2002; Wilson et al., 2002). Recently, the landscape of prime-time television has changed with the infusion of news magazine shows and reality programming. Both types of shows have garnered high ratings and are relatively inexpensive to produce. News magazine shows began
to emerge in the 1990s and by the end of the decade were in the prime-time lineup 6 nights a week. By 2002 the three major networks were producing 12 hour-long shows per week (Potter, 2005). Reality TV shows came to the fore in 2000 with CBS's *Survivor*. By the 2004–05 season, 5 of the top 20 shows in the Nielsen ratings were reality shows, led by *American Idol*, which has been the impetus for the FOX network’s ascent to first place in the ratings among young adult viewers (Romano, 2005). Both types of shows differ from traditional series in that they appear relatively unscripted with news magazines consisting of reporters’ narrative and interviews and reality shows consisting primarily of contests among either celebrity or noncelebrity contestants.

As mentioned previously, the objective of this study was to examine the prevalence of verbal, physical, and indirect aggression on network prime-time programming. Given the theoretical implications, such an analysis would serve as a starting point for understanding the breadth and potential impact of aggression on prime-time network television. Only one study could be found that has examined indirect aggression in the media, and that consisted of popular children’s programming in the United Kingdom (Coyne & Archer, 2004). Relatively few studies have examined verbal aggression, which in the past has taken a decidedly backseat to physical aggression among media researchers. With the advent of new programming formats on the networks’ prime-time schedule, an update of physical aggression also seems worthwhile. As such the following research question is posed:

**RQ1**: What is the prevalence of verbal, physical, and indirect aggression on network prime-time television and how do they compare with previous studies?

If television’s depiction of sex and aggression mirrors real life, then male characters should be more involved in direct aggression (physical and verbal) and females more indirectly aggressive. Given the power imbalances often associated within race/ethnicity and sex, it seems reasonable to expect male-to-female aggression to be more common than female-to-male aggression. The same sort of relationship might be expected for Caucasian-minority interactions involving aggression. These lead to the following research question:

**RQ2**: Does the depiction of aggression in network prime-time programming reflect sex and ethnic power imbalances reported or assumed for aggression in real life?

**Method**

The sample consisted of a week of prime-time programming found on six broadcast networks—ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, WB, and UPN. At the time, these networks
accounted for a majority (52%) of the prime-time audience (Ray, 2005). Programming that aired during prime time (8–11 p.m. for ABC, NBC, and CBS; 8–10 p.m. for FOX, UPN, and WB) was recorded during the last 2 weeks in April 2005. Recorders were instructed to code a night’s worth of prime-time programming during the first week. Regularly scheduled programs not recorded the first week due to technical glitches or special programming (e.g., Miss USA pageant) were recorded the following week. Previously researchers have found that a sample week of television programming provides fairly accurate results as well as cost efficiency (Signorielli, Gross, & Morgan, 1982). In addition, a 1-week sample of existent programming, including all shows and movies, would seem the best reflection of the actual viewing experience of the television audience. Two nights for UPN and 1 for the WB, for which there was no regularly scheduled network programming, were not included in the analysis. All shows were included in the analysis except for two repeats (Stacked and Top Model). This left a final sample of 111 shows and 97 hours of programming.

Since previous content analyses have consistently found females to be underrepresented (Davis, 1990; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999), a subsample of shows (25%) was analyzed to represent the male–female ratio for total characters. The ratio found for the subsample was 65% males to 35% female characters, percentages comparable to recent content analyses of TV programming (Coyne & Archer, 2004; Elasmair, Hasegawa, & Brain, 1999). A similar analysis was conducted for race/ethnicity. The relevant percentages found in the subsample for characters with speaking parts were: Caucasian 78%, African American 13.5%, Hispanic 5%, Asian 2.5%, and Other (Arab, Native American, Unknown) 1%. Again, these would be comparable to recent content analyses of network programming (Glascock, 2001). To avoid multiple t tests and the ensuing risk of Type I error, the minority categories were collapsed into one for the subsequent analyses.

Behaviors coded included verbal aggression, defined as oral communication attacking the self-concept of another (insults, yelling/arguing, threatening, name-calling, sarcasm, etc.) (Coyne & Archer, 2004; Infante et al., 1989); physical aggression, defined as use of overt physical force (hitting, kicking, shooting, stabbing, grabbing, pushing, etc.) intended to frighten, injure, or harm another person (Gerbner & Gross, 1978); and indirect aggression, defined as verbal or physical aggression done behind another’s back, such as gossiping, criticizing another behind their back, rolling eyes, and ignoring (Coyne & Archer, 2004). Character demographics included sex (male, female, and unknown) and race/ethnicity (Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian, and other). For each aggressive incident the initiator and victim’s race/ethnicity and sex were recorded. Genres coded included drama, sitcom, news magazine, reality, and other.

Four trained coders analyzed a randomly chosen subsample of shows (10%) until an acceptable level of reliability (.7 to .8) was reached (Greenberg et al., 1980). Then the coders independently coded the remainder of the shows except for a 15% overlap, from which the reliabilities reported here were estimated. Each show was coded three times, once for each type of aggression. Since the number of incidents
of each type of aggression were counted for each show, the data was treated as interval. As such Krippendorff’s (2004) alpha, which calculates inter-coder reliability for nominal as well as interval data, was used to estimate the reliabilities. Alpha reliabilities for verbal aggression were: overall .74; insults .68; assailant sex .85; assailant race .69; victim sex = .78; and victim race = .75. Reliabilities for indirect aggression were: overall .86; assailant sex .86; assailant race .93; victim sex .83; and victim race .88. Alphas for physical aggression were: overall .96; assailant sex .92; assailant race .88; victim sex .84; and victim race 95. Alpha for the shows’ genre (nominal data) was .95.

Results

For all three types of aggression, 6,599 aggressive acts were coded. Of these, 52% were verbal aggression, 22% physical, and 26% indirect aggression. In all there were about 68 acts of aggression per hour on network prime-time television. The shows’ genres were as follows: comedies 34%, dramas 42%, reality shows 17%, news magazines 6%, and other 1%.

Verbal Aggression

There were 37.9 (SD = 22.3) verbally aggressive acts per hour with 95.5% of all shows containing at least one verbally aggressive act. A significant difference was found among genres, $F(3, 106) = 26.22, p < .001$. Post hoc analysis using Tukey’s Honestly Significant Difference test revealed that comedies ($M = 52.7$, $SD = 20.2$) and dramas ($M = 38.5$, $SD = 16.1$) had the highest average per hour followed by reality shows ($M = 18.8$, $SD = 15.5$) and then news magazines ($M = 1.3$, $SD = 1.6$). About a third of all verbal aggression consisted of insults (31%), for which comedies ($M = 51$, $SD = 28.8$) had significantly more of per hour than dramas ($M = 9.3$, $SD = 7.4$), reality shows ($M = 6.7$, $SD = 6.4$), or news magazines ($M = 0.8$, $SD = 1.3$). $F(3, 106) = 48.5, p < .001$. There were no significant differences for verbal aggression by network, $F(5, 105) = 0.85, p = .52$.

As can be seen in Table 1, males were more likely to both initiate and be the target of verbal aggression. However taking into account the disparity between male and female representation, paired-samples $t$ tests using weighted means were conducted to detect proportional sex differences for aggressors and targets. No significant differences were found for either aggressor sex, $t(110) = 1.01, p = .32$, or victim sex, $t(110) = 0.51, p = .61$, for verbal aggression.

Also in Table 1, male-to-male aggression appears to be the most frequent type of verbal aggression. However, when the means are weighted to reflect the male-female ratio found in the subsample, no significant differences were detected between male-to-male and female-to-female verbal aggression, $t(110) = 1.14, p = .26$. 
Table 1
Sex Differences in Types of Aggression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
<th>Physical*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggressor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2,126 (62%)</td>
<td>956 (55%)</td>
<td>639 (77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1,272 (38%)</td>
<td>787 (45%)</td>
<td>233 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2,186 (64%)</td>
<td>1,048 (59%)</td>
<td>655 (76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1,241 (36%)</td>
<td>738 (41%)</td>
<td>210 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male–Male</td>
<td>1,320 (38%)</td>
<td>596 (34%)</td>
<td>502 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male–Female</td>
<td>798 (23%)</td>
<td>411 (23%)</td>
<td>151 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female–Male</td>
<td>808 (23%)</td>
<td>430 (24%)</td>
<td>145 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female–Female</td>
<td>572 (16%)</td>
<td>333 (19%)</td>
<td>71 (8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Does not include The Contender (270 acts) and WWE Smackdown! (285 acts).

There was also no significant difference between male-to-female and female-to-male verbal aggression, $t(110) = 0.15, p = .88$.

As can be seen in Table 2, Caucasian characters appear more verbally aggressive than minority characters. And after weighting the means, the paired-samples $t$ test indicated that Caucasian characters ($M = 25.5, SD = 18.8$) initiated more verbal aggression than minority characters ($M = 18.2, SD = 28.6$), $t(110) = 2.12, p < .05$.

Table 2
Race/Ethnicity for Types of Aggression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
<th>Physical*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggressor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>2,832 (83%)</td>
<td>1,489 (86%)</td>
<td>766 (85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>571 (17%)</td>
<td>242 (14%)</td>
<td>132 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>2,856 (83%)</td>
<td>1,467 (82%)</td>
<td>722 (81%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>576 (17%)</td>
<td>319 (18%)</td>
<td>168 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian–Caucasian</td>
<td>2,557 (75%)</td>
<td>1,324 (77%)</td>
<td>651 (77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian–Minority</td>
<td>302 (9%)</td>
<td>147 (8%)</td>
<td>74 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority–Caucasian</td>
<td>336 (10%)</td>
<td>155 (9%)</td>
<td>72 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority–Minority</td>
<td>238 (7%)</td>
<td>104 (6%)</td>
<td>44 (5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Does not include The Contender (270 acts) and WWE Smackdown! (285 acts).
Caucasian characters ($M = 25.7, SD = 19.5$) were also more likely to be victims of verbal aggression than minority characters ($M = 18.4, SD = 27.5$), $t(110) = 2.17, p < .05$. Caucasian-to-Caucasian verbal aggression ($M = 23.0, SD = 19.1$) was significantly greater than minority-to-minority verbal aggression ($M = 7.6, SD = 19.3$), $t(110) = 5.31, p < .001$. No significant differences were found for intercultural exchanges (Caucasian-to-minority and minority-to-Caucasian), $t(110) = 0.79, p = .43$.

**Indirect Aggression**

There were 19.2 ($SD = 14.62$) acts of indirect aggression per hour with 97.3% of all shows containing at least one indirectly aggressive act. No significant differences were found among genres, $F(3, 106) = 2.15, p = .10$, or by network, $F(5, 105) = 0.48, p = .79$, for indirect aggression.

Using weighted means, the paired-samples $t$ tests indicated that females ($M = 13.2, SD = 13.5$) initiated indirect aggression more than males ($M = 8.6, SD = 9.1$), $t(110) = 3.05, p > .01$, and were victims ($M = 12.3, SD = 14.0$) of indirect aggression more than males ($M = 9.5, SD = 8.6$), $t(110) = 2.06, p < .05$. No significant differences were found between male-to-male and female-to-female indirect aggression, $t(110) = 0.18, p = .86$, nor male-to-female and female-to-male indirect aggression, $t(110) = 0.28, p = .78$.

For race/ethnicity, Caucasians ($M = 13.4, SD = 11.9$) initiated more indirect aggression than minorities ($M = 7.8, SD = 14.4$), $t(110) = 3.02, p < .01$. However no significant difference was found between Caucasian and minority targets of indirect aggression, $t(110) = 1.61, p = .11$. Caucasian-to-Caucasian acts of indirect aggression ($M = 11.9, SD = 11.4$) were more prevalent than minority-to-minority acts of indirect aggression ($M = 3.3, SD = 11.1$), $t(110) = 5.34, p < .001$. No significant difference was found between Caucasian-to-minority and minority-to-Caucasian incidents, $t(110) = 0.20, p = .84$.

**Physical Aggression**

In total, 13 ($SD = 31.32$) acts of physical aggression per hour were recorded during prime-time programming, with 71.2% of shows containing at least one act of physical aggression. As reflected by the relatively large standard deviation, the number of physical acts per hour ranged from 0 to 270. Two shows, *The Contender* (270 acts) and *WWE Smackdown!* (285 acts) had relatively large quantities of physical aggression. Excluding these from the analysis above, physically aggressive acts per hour drop to 9.5 ($SD = 14.83$). Since including these two shows in the data analyses (and the resulting large variances) appeared to obscure some of the findings and would seem a distortion of the viewing experience for most households, these shows represented less than 2% of shows sampled and were among the lowest rated
during the time period (77th for The Contender and 81st for Smackdown)—they were omitted from the following analyses.

There were no significant differences by genre, \( F(3, 105) = 1.77, p = .16, \) or network, \( F(5, 103) = 1.17, p = .33, \) for physical aggression. Again using weighted means, male characters \( (M = 5.9, SD = 10.6) \) were more likely to be aggressors than females \( (M = 4.0, SD = 8.8), t(108) = 2.09, p < .05, \) and male characters \( (M = 6.0, SD = 10.2) \) were also more likely than females \( (M = 3.6, SD = 9.5) \) to be victims of physical aggression, \( t(108) = 2.39, p < .05. \) Male-to-male aggression \( (M = 4.6, SD = 8.8) \) was more frequent than female-to-female physical aggression \( (M = 1.2, SD = 4.8), t(108) = 3.83, p < .001. \) There were no significant differences for inter-sex aggression (male-to-female and vice versa), \( t(108) = .23, p = .82. \)

For race and ethnicity, Caucasian characters \( (M = 7.0, SD = 12.9) \) were more likely to be instigators of physical aggression than minority characters \( (M = 4.3, SD = 10.2), t(108) = 2.00, p > .05. \) However, there was no significant difference between Caucasian and minority characters in terms of victimization, \( t(108) = .67, p = .50. \) While there were no inter-race/ethnicity differences, \( t(108) = .07, p = .94. \) Caucasian-to-Caucasian physical aggression \( (M = 5.9, SD = 11.7) \) was more prevalent than minority-to-minority physical aggression \( (M = 1.4, SD = 5.4), t(108) = 3.55, p < .01. \)

Discussion

Verbal aggression was the most prevalent type of aggression found on network prime-time television, double that of indirect aggression and four times as frequent as physical aggression. Compared to previous studies, verbal aggression appeared to be more frequent in this sample. One difference may have been the use of “yelling or arguing” as one of the subcategories, a protocol used by Coyne and Archer (2004). Arguing was coded as verbal aggression when a character raised his or her voice during the argument. This may have been perceived more expansively than Greenberg et al.’s (1980) subcategory of “hostile acts,” which included yelling, screaming, or shouting. On the other hand, the notion that verbal aggression may have increased since the 1970s on prime-time television would be consistent with Scharrer’s (2000) finding that putdowns of the sitcom father have increased significantly over the years. Also consistent with past findings was that a major source of verbal aggression was comedies, in which the verbal aggression consisted primarily of insults. Given the imitable nature of TV programming, the presumption here is that exposure to relatively frequent depictions of verbal aggression on television would increase verbal aggression among viewers in real life, and, according to Infante’s model (Infante et al., 1989), impact physical aggression as well.

While no sex effects were found for verbal aggression, Caucasians were depicted as more verbally aggressive than minorities; a tendency also found for indirect and physical aggression. Overall, minorities were depicted as not very aggressive, compared to their Caucasian counterparts on prime-time television. This type of
characterization may reflect a lack of significant roles for minorities on prime time, or perhaps a script (that of a passive, nonthreatening minority) thought likely to appeal to a largely Caucasian viewing audience.

Indirect aggression was more prevalent in this study than Coyne and Archer’s (2004) study of British programming. Given the nuances involved in indirect aggression, it seems reasonable to expect less of it in children’s programming. Females were found to be more often the aggressor as well as the victim of indirect aggression. This would be consistent with reports of indirect aggression in the real world as being more typical of females than males (Coyne et al., 2004; Osterman et al., 1998).

The least frequent form of aggression found in this study was physical, which was also not as pervasive as indirect and verbal, appearing in only about 70% of all shows (vs. the almost universality of indirect and verbal). In her study of 1990s network programming, Signorielli (2003) reported finding about 5 acts of physical aggression per show, which contrasts with the 13 acts per hour found in this study. One reason for this may be that this study included movies and sports-related shows, which may not have been the case for the 1990s samples. In addition, acts per show would be less than acts per hour in prime time because with half hour-long comedies, there are typically more shows than hours of programming. Nonetheless, it appears that the physical aggression found in this study was more prevalent than that found in previous studies, albeit a significant portion was confined to two lowly rated shows. Apparently the introduction of new programming formats (reality and news programming) has done little to stem the nightly dosage of physical aggression offered up by the broadcast networks.

Considering the abundance of direct and indirect aggression found on prime-time television in this study, the chances of viewers being exposed to large amounts of some form of aggressive behavior on television would appear quite high. As Cohen and Archer (2004) note, it seems important to acknowledge that television programs can model highly aggressive behavior without being particularly physical violent. According to priming or social learning theory, this persistent depiction of aggression on television, not only physical, but verbal and indirect as well, likely serves as a model or cue for comparable behavior among viewers. As such, the cultivation effect may be that of a not-so-friendly world, as depicted on television, and perhaps reinforced in everyday life.

In terms of sex roles, the portrayal of aggression on prime-time television seems somewhat realistic in that males were depicted as more physically aggressive, females more indirectly aggressive, and both sexes equally verbally aggressive. This would be consistent with findings of studies of real-world aggression, with the exception of verbal aggression, which appears more sex balanced on TV than in the real world where males typically predominate (Richardson & Green, 1999). Physical aggression seems to be largely a (Caucasian) male-to-male activity, a situation supported by the dyad findings. A similar tendency was found for females and indirect aggression. No significant differences were found for either cross-
sex or cross-cultural interactions, indicating that at least in these situations, the treatment of sex and race/ethnicity seems somewhat balanced. While the prevalence of aggression on prime-time television might affect more aggression in society, the types of depictions found here wouldn’t seem to specifically promote inter-sex or racial conflict.

In part, these findings are based on weighted representations of sex and race/ethnicity on prime time, as opposed to what the viewer was actually seeing, which would be a preponderance of Caucasians and males involved in all forms of aggression. The question that arises is which would have the most effect? The weighted representations or the actual ones? It does seem the television industry could do more in terms of the latter. An example in this study would be an episode of ABC’s 20/20, which examined various food myths. During the program, correspondents conducted over 70 interviews with experts, industry representatives, and consumers. The one trait these subjects all had in common was that they were Caucasian. This seems particularly egregious given that most of the subjects were seemingly randomly selected, “people on the street” type interviewees.

While verbal aggression seems to have increased on prime-time television since the 1970s, worth noting is that measuring it, and to a lesser extent indirect aggression, proved to be somewhat more challenging than physical aggression. As Greenberg et al. (1980) noted many years ago, it is comparably much easier to recognize physical aggression because it is visual, but more difficult to notice and interpret the various nuances of verbal exchanges. However such difficulties should not preclude the attempt, especially since verbal and indirect aggression were found to be much more prevalent in this study than physical aggression. Given the average viewer hours spent in front of a television set, it seems safe to say that regardless of what one watches on prime-time network television, they will, on average, be exposed to substantial amounts of aggressive behavior, and subject to the inevitable, ensuing social learning and cultivation processes.

Note

1While reality programs are relatively unscripted, many are heavily edited in terms of the footage available for broadcast and what is actually selected by producers for viewers to see. For a more inclusive discussion of the representation of reality on reality TV, see Escoffery (2006).

References


