Communication in Television Soaps

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Television soap operas are enthusiastically watched by many and are likely to provide models of social interaction. In a preliminary analysis of all 13 English-speaking programmes on Scottish television, just over 50% of the total number of interactions demonstrated poor relationship skills, and these skills were more prevalent (66%) in the most popular and the British productions. Over all the programmes unhealthy forms of hostility, power, and fear occurred twice as frequently as healthy assertive patterns of communication.

As Western society has changed, a person spends less time in an extended family and in the small, stable groups where they can observe the intimate interactions of a variety of relationships. Novels, magazines, and television, all of which are concerned with interpersonal problems and relationships, provide possible substitute models of social interaction (Downing, 1974; Buckingham, 1987). It is apparent that the use of these models may be even more prevalent in children (Eron, Huesmann, Fischer, & Mermelstein, 1983; Fishbein, 1984). Certain television dramas do not appear to require the willing suspension of disbelief, and people react to them in many ways as if they were portraying real events (Hobson, 1982).

Although the soap opera, a term coined as a result of the initial sponsorship by soap powder manufacturers, is now one of the most popular types of programme (Anon., 1989), there is surprisingly little research on certain aspects of their content. The few published studies involve asking people why they watch soaps, whether they think them realistic, what soaps tell the viewer, and the correlation of behaviour on soaps with behaviour in the community, specifically suicides (but see Livingstone, 1987). Cantor and Pingree's (1982, p.84) speculation that soaps may be potentially "emotionally hazardous because of the continual sorting and resorting of relationships" appears not to have provoked published research.

Soap opera writers have contended that part of their goal is to teach the lessons of life to their audiences (Cantor & Pingree, 1983). In order to verify the accuracy of this contention and attempt an evaluation of these lessons of life, it is important to

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describe and categorise the relationships portrayed. Family Therapy in general and Assertiveness Training in particular set specific criteria for healthy, desirable interaction within the context of therapy (Textor, 1989). If soaps reflect life, we might expect there to be a balance between two forms, with a predominance of healthy assertive interaction over unhealthy spiteful communication. And if they teach lessons of life, one lesson might be that healthy assertive forms are more effective. The purpose of this preliminary study is to measure the relative occurrence of different forms of communication from the perspective of clinical psychology and assertiveness training.

Method

All 13 of the English-speaking soaps presented on Scottish television during the last 4 months of 1988 were selected for study; 5 were made in Britain, 5 in Australia, and 3 in the United States of America. Table 1 gives details of title, time of day when shown, and estimates of their popularity (Anon., 1989). Over 8 to 16 weeks, extracts of between 3 and 10 min were chosen randomly from episodes (range 16 to 52) of each soap; these lasted a total of 3 hours on average for each soap. They were recorded onto a video recorder for analysis. The proportion of time recorded reflected the total viewing time per week of the British population. A total of 27 hours of interactions were analysed by one rater, P.M., after extensive discussion and instruction from a therapist who had used assertiveness training, A.S.C.

Family therapists teach healthy interaction, and these criteria were used to appraise the interactions. Behaviour categories were devised from several Family Therapy texts (especially Nelson-Jones, 1986; Satir, 1985) and from factor analyses of behaviour (especially Chamove, Eysenck, & Harlow, 1974; Hinde, 1979). "Interactions"

were divided into five behavioural categories, which were further subdivided into positive/negative and the negative into direct/indirect communications, the former being the more healthy in both categories. Examples of direct and indirect communications are respectively: "I don't like your shoes", and "You're not wearing those shoes again." Positive communications were assertive sentences which express the intentions of emotions of the person with minimal evaluation; whereas negative communications commonly have a component of negative evaluation.

The 5 behavioural categories used were the following: (1) Hostile—composed of either assertive (positive, $K = .89$) or aggressive (negative, $K = .92$) components; examples were respectively "Doing that annoys me," and "You are mean." (2) Affiliative—composed of either assertive care-seeking and care-giving ($K = .87$) or manipulative ($K = .91$) components; such as "That makes me feel good," and "Couldn't you even have sent me a card?" (3) Power—composed of either assertive dominating ($K = .81$) or pressuring ($K = .82$) components; as in "I make financial decisions here," and "You little worm." (4) Fear—composed of assertive submissive ($K = .89$) or denial ($K = .86$) components; for example "I am afraid," and "How are you going to fix this mess?" (5) Neutral—such as an observation about the weather ($K = .73$). Oral material, intonation, gestures, and gaze were all considered in the assessment of interactions.[2]

Interactions were declarations by a person bounded by discourse of others. If statements contained more than one category, all were recorded. Raw data was transformed into percentages of each soap's total interactions before statistical analysis. Analysis of variance was used to compare differences between country of origin and between behaviour categories; Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used for associations of behaviour categories with popularity. Alpha was set at .05 and was two-tailed throughout.

Results

In summary, just over one-half of the inter-personal interactions comprising the 13 soaps were rated as negative and this proportion increased to two-thirds on exclusion of affiliative interactions predominantly rated as positive. The British soaps, in particular the most popular British shows, produced the greatest proportion of negative interactions, while the Australian and least popular soaps furnished the lowest proportion.

Analysis by country revealed that Australian soaps had the lower proportion of negative interactions and British the highest with American intermediate, $F(2,4) = 18.0, p < .01$. As illustrated in Figure 1, the Australian soaps display a high proportion of negative patterns of hostility relative to positive forms, the American emphasise a high proportion of both negative hostility and power, and the British are
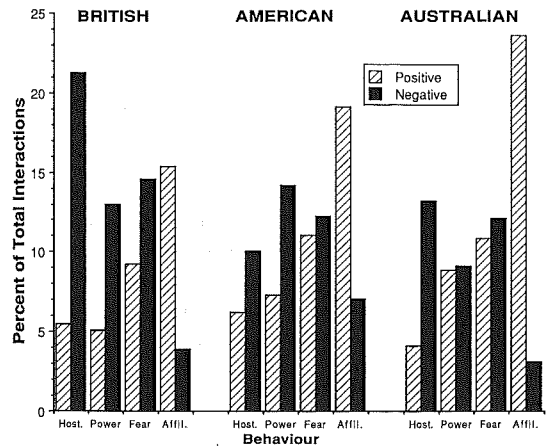

Fig. 1. Percent of interactions in the four behaviour categories in television soaps from three countries; positive means assertive.

proportionately higher on negative hostility, power and fear.

The total disparity between positive interactions and negative (Table 1) was greatest in Australian soaps where positive interactions predominated, intermediate in American programmes where the two were about equal, and least in British-made soaps where negative interactions prevailed. Also presented in Table 1 are the comparable ratios for the three behaviour categories excluding affiliative behaviour that, with only one exception (Coronation Street, shown in Fig. 2) was composed of predominantly positive interactions.

By contrasting the most and least popular soaps there is clearly a difference in the proportion of positive and negative forms of the behaviours assessed; the most popular of the 13 programmes showed the greatest number of negative behavioural patterns, while the least popular displayed the fewest (see Fig. 2). In the popular Coronation Street, positive power interactions occur only 43% as frequently as negative types, positive fear only 20% of negative, and positive aggressive behaviour occurs only 10% as often as negative aggressive interactions.

Popularity correlated significantly with the total number of fear interactions observed, $r(13) = .61$, $p < .03$, but not with the frequency of hostility, $r = .16$, affiliation, $r = .44$, or power, $r = .23$. Popularity also correlated with the ratio of negative to positive interactions, $r = .61$, $p < .03$, and with negative/positive (excluding affiliative) interactions, $r = .58$, $p < .04$, over all programmes. Comparable values were found for the correlations for British and for

Table 1: Programme Details

Title	Time Broadcast	UK Viewing Figures (millions)	RESULTS			
			Interactions		Ratio	
			Positive (%)		+/-	
BRITISH						
Coronation Street	1900	22+	25%	(18)[a]	.33	(.32)[a]
Eastenders	**1900**	19+	43%	(30)	.75	(.43)
Emmerdale Farm	**1830**	12	43%	(27)	.75	(.37)
Brookside	1600	7	45%	(35)	.82	(.54)
Take the High Road	**1900**[b]	3	42%	(32)	.72	(.47)
Mean			40%	(29)	.67	(.41)
AMERICAN						
Falcon Crest	1400	2	52%	(56)	1.1	(1.3)
Knots Landing	1410	1	53%	(37)	1.2	(.59)
Santa Barbara	1000	1-	52%	(56)	1.8	(1.3)
Mean			50%	(41)	1.0	(.70)
AUSTRALIAN						
Neighbours	**1730**[c]	19+	52%	(38)	1.1	(.61)
The Sullivans	1230	2+	73%	(44)	2.0	(.79)
Sons & Daughters	1530	2	51%	(38)	1.0	(.61)
The Young Doctors	1530	1	57%	(40)	1.3	(.67)
A Country Practice	1400	1-	59%	(46)	1.5	(.85)
Mean			56%	(42)	1.3	(.71)
GRAND MEAN			*49%*	*(36)*	*.95*	*(.55)*

[a] Values in brackets are for behaviour patterns excluding affiliative behaviour.
[b] In England at 1500 hours; bold type indicates prime-time.
[c] Also shown at 1300 hours.

Australian soaps. The highest correlation with popularity was found between the percentage of negative interactions with affiliation excluded, $r = .68, p < .01$; this association was raised to .78 when calculated for British soaps alone.

The proportions of negative and positive interactions differed between the different behaviours, $F(1,4) = 38.8, p < .0001$. Over all soaps positive fear behaviour was only 80% of negative, positive power was only 62% of negative, and for the behaviour category hostility the proportion was down to 33%. Only for affiliative interactions were positive forms consistently above negative forms; here the frequency of the positive averaged four times that of the negative.

An analysis of neutral patterns, which constitute 11% of the total number of interactions, failed to produce any significant national effect. There was a significant correlation showing that soaps of low popularity had the greatest percentage of interactions rated as neutral, $r = .64, p < .01$. The analysis of direct/indirect communications suggests that overall, slightly more were direct, the contrast being most extreme for fear behaviour. There was no country or popularity effect for this attribute.
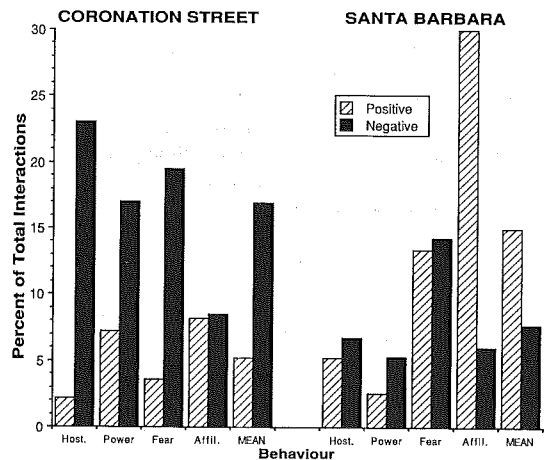

Fig. 2. Percent of interactions for the most popular (left—Coronation Street), and least popular (right—Santa Barbara) television soaps.

Discussion

Despite 50% of soap marriages ending in divorce (Cantor & Pingree, 1983), Fishbein (1982) reports that television families were typically portrayed positively, 90% of their interactions being supportive and

cooperative. In our preliminary analysis, just over half the interactions observed on the 13 English-speaking soap operas were those that a family therapist would characterize as unhealthy, undesirable, or unassertive. These negative interactions were proportionately higher in British-made soaps, particularly the popular shows of which 76% of all interactions were negative. Our results suggest that many viewers are likely to have many opportunities to observe ineffective interaction patterns.

The extent to which the characteristics we have described are deliberate choices of soap writers is not published. It is our guess that certain attributes are carefully chosen. The less popular afternoon soaps have women as a target audience, and these programmes portray more positive, more affiliative, and more fear interactions. While it may be that in soaps, suffering is the most powerful vehicle of narrative (Buckingham, 1987), we were surprised that not one character regularly or even predominantly exhibited the types of healthy communications exemplified in family therapy and assertiveness texts. The benefits of such a negative bias may be exciting drama and popularity; we wonder what the costs might be.

Notes

[1] The index of concordance called the kappa coefficient was computed using one 10-min sample of each of the 13 programmes and 2 raters. The resulting coefficients are given above for both the positive and negative components (n = 13).

[2] These categories, while not used before, are consistent with terminology used by clinical psychologists. Details of definitions of the behaviour patterns are available by request from the senior author.

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