

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JONATHAN L. FREEDMAN, *Media Violence and Its Effect on Aggression: Assessing the Scientific Evidence*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, xi + 222p., Index, \$50 hardcover, \$24.95 paper.

Jonathan Freedman is a psychologist at the University of Toronto who has made a career disputing that there is a causal connection between media violence and real violence in society. Every major professional organization, claims Freedman, from the American Psychological Association to the American Academy of Pediatricians to the United States National Institute of Mental Health, often quote the figure that world-wide there have been over 3,500 studies which support the link between media violence and aggression. Remarkably they have avoided the task of reviewing the research in detail. In all, claims Freedman, there are roughly two hundred good scientific studies on this topic, and his aim is to review the evidence. But there is a curious wrinkle in this story.

With Freedman's public notoriety as an outspoken critic of the effects of media violence came the suspect embrace of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPPA) which approached him to do a comprehensive review of the research on media violence. He accepted MPPA funding on the condition they would have no input in the final review. He is careful to explain that his review is not a meta-analysis, as the issue is far too complex for this approach and the few meta-analyses available can be faulted for having made questionable assumptions that led to even more debatable conclusions. The book is written in lively, accessible language, avoids technicalities and is aimed at a general audience, but it is clearly of value to other social scientists. Freedman focusses on published research available only in English, summarizes that research and then offers a general discussion of the relevant studies. The literature review organizes the studies into six groups: surveys, experiments, field studies, longitudinal and comparative research, other approaches that do not fit neatly within an easily recognized category, and research that makes a connection between media violence, desensitization, and a climate of fear.

Freedman's assessment of the survey research suggests that there is a weak and inconsistent correlation between exposure to or preference for media violence and aggression, probably between .1 and .2, but correlation is not by any means proof of causality. Laboratory experiments have been the most common form of such research and these have often been very imaginative, but also limited because they take place in artificial rather

than real settings. These studies have tried to assess whether subjects learn scripts that tend to elicit aggression, and they have been consistently described as providing the strongest support for the causal hypothesis. Freedman suggests otherwise. He examines 87 lab experiments, including well know studies of children hitting Bobo dolls after being exposed to adults performing the same behaviour. The Bobo doll type experiments, claims Freedman, tell us a lot about imitation but "nothing about aggression" (62).

Perhaps the best known field study is that of Fleshbach and Singer (1971), who investigated seven residential schools and randomly assigned 625 boys to watch only violent television programs or non-violent programs for six weeks. Surprisingly, those who watched violent television committed *fewer* aggressive acts than those who watched non-violent television, leading the authors to conclude that the results were due to a "catharsis effect." Though none of the field research was perfect in design and execution, "none of them produced unambiguous, consistent evidence" (107) that exposure to violent television or films increases aggression.

Longitudinal and comparative studies of communities that have or do not have television fare no better. There have been very few longitudinal studies, eight in total, as they are extremely ambitious and costly. The famous studies of Leon Eron et al. followed their subjects as long as twenty-two years yet found no effects for either girls or boys. The evidence gathered from longitudinal studies is far from conclusive and is sometimes mixed but does not, according to Freedman, produce the kind of consistent backing needed to support the causal hypothesis.

The studies that compare communities with and without television are more interesting given the fact that they study the effects of television in natural settings over a fairly long period of time. The most controversial conclusion derived from this type of study is that of Brandon Centerwall, who claimed that television has caused a doubling of homicides in the United States and Canada. Freedman spends considerable time dispelling this claim, arguing that "this conclusion is not valid either logically or scientifically" (139). While serious researchers have dismissed Centerwall's rash speculation, the popular media has pounced on it.

There is, Freedman claims, a small body of research on the relation between violent media exposure and desensitization. The evidence seems to suggest that prolonged exposure to media violence may cause habituation and a reduced responsiveness to further media violence. However, there is little evidence that this response carries over to violence in the real world. The strongest evidence suggests that exposure to media violence causes people to become less excited, or less impressed by subsequent media violence, but it does not produce a reduced responsiveness to real violence.

Freedman concedes that it is likely that media coverage of real violence such as the Columbine shooting "does effect aggression and crime" (210)

and that repeated exposure to real violence can cause a desensitization effect, and suggests that this is "perhaps what people should be focusing on" (210). Freedman is, I believe, probably correct that fictionalized violent programs likely do not increase aggressive behaviour, but under the rubric of "media entertainment" there are many implicit lessons to be learned, such as who has the power to use violence against whom, who are the typical aggressors, and who are the victims? To argue that there is little or no scientific evidence for the causal hypothesis is an important and serious claim, but to then state that television programs are "just entertainment" and are meant to be "popular" as Freedman does, is frivolous. The claim begs more questions than it answers, not only about how popular entertainment is interpreted by viewers but also about whether there even *is* such a simple, transparent thing such as "just entertainment." This is both the strong point and weakness of the work. It debunks many of the hysterical claims that have been made against the media and as consequence it will be very useful to any student of the media, educator, or social scientist, but it does very little to question the power of the media. In this regard the MPAA got their money's worth.

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