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Television's role in the socialization and cultivation of at-risk youth

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TELEVISION'S ROLE IN THE SOCIALIZATION
AND CULTIVATION OF AT-RISK YOUTH

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the
School of Journalism and Mass Communications
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

by
Desiree Lea Jafferries

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Abstract

Television's Role in the Socialization and Cultivation of At-Risk Youth

by Desiree Lea Jafferries

This thesis explored the effects of television in the cultivation of youth at risk for failing or dropping out of high school. It examined sexual content, violence, and drug and alcohol use in the television programs they watched. This was a comparison study using survey methods and content analysis with students not considered at-risk for dropping out of school.

The research revealed that at-risk students and students not considered at risk watch similar programs, suggesting a universal appeal to teenagers about television programs regardless of their risk factors. This study found that at-risk students were not influenced by the programs they watched. Research revealed that television has greater influence on at-risk students than for students not at risk. This study found at-risk students perceived more violence in their environment and they also found drugs and alcohol more acceptable than students not at-risk.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

At-risk youth often exhibit delinquent behavior because they have failed to form adequate social bonds--particularly with their parents and their schools (Thornton & Voigt, 1984, p. 446). Researchers believe that when teenagers fail to form these important bonds, television has a different effect on their socialization than it would otherwise have had. Specifically, they may be more apt to take on the behaviors that they see portrayed on television (Morgan & Rothschild, 1983, p. 37; Peterson & Peters, 1983, p. 77). Gerbner and Gross (1976) consider television to be a significant socializer in American society (p. 175). Television, combined with family, school, and peer influence has contributed heavily to the cultivation and socialization process in a way that no other medium has.

The United States General Accounting Office (1996) has defined at-risk youth as children 5 years of age or older who live in poverty, have poor academic resources, and are exposed to drugs, alcohol, or violence in their environment. These children are statistically more likely to encounter legal, social, financial, educational, emotional, and health problems in the future (pp. 1-2).

Farmer (1990) defines an at-risk youth as a teenager between the ages of 11 and 17 "who perpetrates threats and/or harm to another person" (p. 4). The National Research

Council (1993) on high-risk youth defines at-risk youth as adolescents who are "far more likely than others to adopt risky life-styles characterized by drug use, unprotected sexual behavior, dropping out of school, delinquency, and violence" (p. 1). In this study, the author defines an at-risk youth as a teenager between the ages of 13 and 19 who is in danger of failing or dropping out of high school. No single risk factor puts teenagers in danger of failing or dropping out, rather, it is a combination of factors: family neglect, teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, gang membership, and poverty, to name but a few.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore the role that television plays in the construction of reality and cultivation in at-risk youth. This study examines the television programs that at-risk youths watch and the behaviors of the main characters who serve as role models. In this way, it attempts to explore the possible validations and reinforcements that at-risk youths receive through television. This study could be used as an avenue for discussion in mentoring programs and other agendas because it may cast some light on the social constructs of at-risk youth.

Theories to be Examined

This study examines past theoretical research and studies on cultivation and socialization through television.

It specifically discusses the theories of social construction of reality and cultivation analysis. It introduces hypotheses and research questions based on the literature review and theoretical concepts of television effects research.

Research Design

The research design is a comparison study and content analysis of television programs watched by at-risk youth. It examines particular behaviors exhibited by the main characters of these programs with regard to sex, violence, and substance use.

Methodology and Analysis

This study explores the viewing habits of students at two schools within Santa Clara County. Foothill High School is in the East Side Union School District which is a continuation high school. It is considered a "last-resort" school for troubled teens. The viewing habits of these students are compared with those of students at Wilcox High School in the Santa Clara School District--a conventional high school. The research seeks to determine if at-risk youth are more susceptible to the influence of television than teenagers not considered to be at risk.

Methodology includes a questionnaire about viewing habits. The questionnaire generates information about the television programs that the members of both study groups watch. A content analysis determines sexual content,

violence, and drug and alcohol use exhibited in the programs. A statistical analysis examines the influence, if any, that television has on the cultivation and socialization process in at-risk youth.

This study focuses on sexual content, violence, and drug and alcohol use because research has shown that teen pregnancy, gang activity and substance abuse are three of the major risk factors for teenagers in the at-risk study group (Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 1998, p. 8). The author acknowledges that these teenagers may exhibit other risk factors as well. The author further acknowledges that teenagers from Wilcox High School may also exhibit these risk factors. However, what makes the teenagers from Foothill different from their peers at Wilcox is that they have been positively identified as being in danger of failing to graduate.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This literature review provides background information on at-risk youth as a frame of reference for the present study. The review explores theories and concepts which offers some explanations why certain teenagers may be at risk for failing or dropping out of high school. It also examines similar studies in the past.

Impact on Society

"It is estimated that one million youth per year leave school without completing their basic educational requirements" (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 11). How can these youth compete in today's marketplace? How can they contribute to society? What future do they have? The unemployment rate for a high school dropout is almost 3 times the rate for a high school graduate (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996, p. 3). At-risk teenagers not only are in danger of failing or dropping out of high school, but may also enter adulthood illiterate, drug dependent, as teenage parents, or with poor employment opportunities (p. 3).

Prior to 1960, job opportunities were available even to U.S. youth who did not finish high school. Workers could get a factory job and still make a decent living wage. There were enough opportunities that required manual labor instead of formal education. Literacy did not matter and workers

could still realize the American dream of owning a home and cars and raising a family.

However, modern electronic and computer technology has altered the job market; the need now is for more educated workers and fewer manual laborers (National Research Council, 1993, p. 28). Today's job market requires more sophisticated skills and abilities than the job market of 30 years ago. Even the military, which once presented high school dropouts with career opportunities, requires at least a high school diploma equivalency (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 6). "The consequences of dropping out of high school are perhaps the most critical reason for concern" (Wells, 1990, p. 1). The economic burden shows up as increased taxes to support welfare programs and fight crime (pp. 1-2). A conservative estimate for federal spending dedicated to at-risk youth in 1995 was over \$4 billion, for example (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996, p. 5). Many teenagers who drop out of school have almost no hope of obtaining more than a minimum-wage job and have little opportunity for advancement, health benefits, or future retirement. Quoting 1993 statistics, the U.S. Census Bureau (1998) observed that over 40% of dropouts, especially teenage mothers, live in poverty, and 79% receive two or more months of public assistance in a given year.

In a study conducted in 1990, Farmer explained why some young people behave the way they do, using the assumptions of

strain theory, the theory of differential association, and labeling theory. According to strain theory, teenagers share similar values and strive to live a stress free, middle class life. When those goals are blocked by low income constraints, teenagers may resort to crime to achieve their goals (Farmer, 1990, p. 23). In the theory of differential association, the young person learns criminal behavior from respected sources as a way to achieve goals (p. 23). Labeling theory demonstrates that young people who are negatively labeled live up to the label. If a young person is labeled a criminal, he or she starts to believe it because of the way people react to him or her (p. 24).

Risk Factors

Numerous risk factors place youth at risk for failing academically. Usually a series of interrelated events occurs before a teenager drops out of high school. Risk factors may include family problems, or school and community related issues, such as drugs, gang membership, and teenage pregnancy (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 13, Wells, 1990, pp. 4-7).

Family Problems

No family is without problems. The idealized television families of the 1950s do not exist and never did. Single-parent households, low socioeconomic status, drug-addicted, and alcoholic parents, domestic violence, and uneducated parents can be any one of family-related risk factors associated with academic failure because children learn from

their environment (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 12; Farmer, 1990, p. 10).

Teenagers at risk for dropping out of high school are more likely to come from single-parent, female-headed households. U.S. dropout rates for these teens are 61% higher among Caucasians, 26% higher among African Americans, and 23% higher among Latinos than from teens who come from two-parent households (National Research Council, 1993, p. 51). In single-parent households, teens often lack supervision because their mothers must work long hours to survive, and these teens also tend to be financially disadvantaged. The incidence of poverty in single-parent households is 7 to 8 times higher than the incidence of poverty in two-parent families. About 73% of single-parent households in the United States live in poverty at some point in their lives, compared to about 12% of two-parent households (National Research Council, 1993, p. 44). Children of divorce often display higher levels of teenage rebellion and poor school performance because they are reacting to stress between the parents, who may use the children against one another during the divorce process. Studies indicate that children from stepfamilies are also at risk for poor school performance (National Research Council, 1993, p. 51).

In 1994, the median U.S. family income was \$35,048 for Caucasians, \$20,032 for African Americans, and \$23,472 for

Latinos (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998, p. 1). Adolescents who grow up in low-income families are at higher risk for delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and dropping out of school (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 14; National Research Council, 1993, p. 42). Low-income teenagers have lower rates of achievement in school because they are more likely to live in poor conditions, have inadequate services, and go to schools that lack educational funding (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997, p. 302). Forty-one percent of Latino Americans live in poverty compared to 13% of Caucasians (p. 302). Latino youths have the highest high school dropout rate in the United States (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997, p. 302; Wells, 1990, p. 7). Only 69% of Caucasians, 65% of African Americans, and 61% of Latinos from low-income families will graduate or earn a high school equivalency diploma (National Research Council, 1993, p. 43). Conversely, 93% of youths from the highest-income families graduate (p. 105).

Child abuse, neglect, and domestic violence are all associated with negative behavior in teenagers (National Research Council, 1993, p. 55). Violence and abuse may be the result of economic pressure, substance abuse by the parents, or lack of parenting skills. Whatever the cause, children who experience family violence are at greater risk for dropping out because they learn aggressive coping skills that are counterproductive in a school environment. Emotional abuse can be just as harmful as physical abuse,

because it erodes self-esteem. Furthermore, family violence is self-perpetuating--it is passed on from one generation to the next, leaving future generations at risk for failing academically.

Parental substance abuse also puts children at higher risk for dropping out of school. Drug-addicted parents are less likely to participate in their children's education. Also, 35 to 75% of parents who abuse drugs and alcohol sometimes abuse their children, and they will almost certainly neglect them (Committee on Substance Abuse, 1995, p. 442). Many children learn substance abuse habits from their parents as a way of coping with social or academic frustration which can lead to dropping out of school.

School-Related Risk Factors

Eighty percent of teenagers who drop out of high school do so because they are academically poor performers or because they experience behavior problems (Wells, 1990, p. 5). Poor achievement can be measured by grades, exams, and the failure to be promoted. Potential high school dropouts tend to fall in the lower percentiles on standardized tests (p. 4). Academic failure contributes to these students' negative attitudes about teachers, the learning experience, and school in general.

The school environment itself can contribute to academic failure. Poor facilities, inadequate resources, and overworked teachers all erode the learning environment. All

of these factors are related to poverty. Poor communities in the United States spend an average of less than \$4,500 per student per year on their schools (National Research Council, 1993, p. 106). Affluent communities spend between \$6,000 and \$7,500 per student (p. 106). Often, in low-income schools, more emphasis is placed on vocational training than on academic learning. Consequently, low income students are at a higher risk of dropping out because they do not learn the value of education either from the school or from their families.

Substance Abuse

In 1992, the most recent year for which statistics are available on teen alcohol and drug abuse, 75% of high school seniors reported using alcohol during the past year and 25% reported using marijuana regularly (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996, p. 4). Teenagers try drugs and alcohol for a variety of reasons including peer pressure, family history of drug abuse, and curiosity. Whatever the reason, kids who abuse drugs and alcohol are at greater risk for dropping out of school because partying becomes the focus. Substance abuse not only puts academics at risk, it put lives at risk. Substance abuse is considered one of the main killers of young people. Drugs and alcohol are often a contributing factor in suicides, car accidents, robberies, and murders (Hunnicutt, Patterson, & Stutts, 1992, p. 96; Farmer, 1990, p. 12). Eighty to ninety percent of unintentional injuries,

deaths, and homicides occur under the influence of alcohol (Committee on Substance Abuse, 1995, p. 440). Part of the problem with alcohol abuse is that it is socially acceptable to drink. Many parents think of teenage drinking as a rite of passage. Adolescents may find it more difficult than adults to perceive the risks associated with alcohol because they do not see themselves as vulnerable to accidents or disease (Hunnicutt et.al., 1992, p.96). Alcohol consumption among young adults has been associated with this inability to perceive the risks associated with drinking (p. 105). Eighty-eight percent of high school seniors have tried alcohol at least once (Committee on Substance Abuse, 1995, p. 439). Alcohol abuse among high school dropouts is significantly higher. Eleven percent had their first drink by the sixth grade (p. 440).

Drug abuse among teenagers increases when their peers also use drugs. Drug abuse among teenagers is also strongly linked with drug abuse by parents or siblings. Twenty-five percent of teenagers who use drugs report they did so to fit in with their peers (Levine, 1986, p. 63). Many at-risk youths get high as a way to cope and to relieve stress (p. 64). Teenagers cannot learn if they are high. Drug abuse also leads to truancy, because getting high becomes a student's main priority and going to school gets in the way of it.

Gangs

Aquila and Clay (1994) defined a gang as a group associated with a territory who commonly share symbols, clothing, and insignia as a way of expressing membership and identity (Aquila & Clay, 1994, p. 65). The mass media have spread the gang phenomenon throughout music and television (p. 66). Most people associate gangs with urban youths, but gangs are everywhere, including the suburbs. No socioeconomic stratum is immune to gangs either (Mycek, 1997, p. 9). Gang involvement interferes with academic learning and may lead the student to drop out of school because the gang becomes more important to him or her. Gangs involve criminal activity that leaves members without legitimate employment opportunities even if they choose to quit the gang.

Teenagers join gangs for a variety of reasons. Some youths join because they seek a sense of belonging. Others join for protection from other people or gangs. A gang can become a powerful magnet when a teenager lacks guidance and parental support (Mycek, 1997, p. 9). Some teenagers view gangs as a way of making fast money. The concept of hard work is meaningless to these youths because hard work does not necessarily raise the standard of living. Some teenagers from such hopeless backgrounds do not believe they have a future. Therefore, they cannot see the benefits of an

education. For many gang-affiliated teenagers, the American dream does not exist (Mycek, 1997, p. 12).

For gang members, violence is a way of life. Violence is the method they use to resolve conflicts and gain respect. Between 1988 and 1992, violent crime by juveniles increased 47% (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996, p. 4). In 1992, 1 out of every 13 juveniles was a victim of violence (p. 4).

Teen Pregnancy

Teenage mothers are likely to be less educated and more likely to have larger families than women who give birth after age 20 (Kirby, 1997, p. 1). Teenage mothers have a harder time concentrating on school, because caring for their child leaves them little free time to study. Teenage fathers, if they stick around, often have to quit school to help support the baby. Most of the burden of teenage parenthood, however, falls upon the mothers and that puts them at greater risk for dropping out of school than teenage fathers.

According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 66% of teenagers will be sexually active before they leave high school (Kirby, 1997, p. 1). As a result, about 1 million teenagers become pregnant every year (p. 2). Those teenagers at greatest risk for becoming pregnant are low income, have low levels of education, and have lived in several homes. Fifty-five percent of teenage girls who become pregnant were under the influence of drugs or alcohol

at the time of conception (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, April 1997, p. 3). Pregnant teenagers are also more likely be poor performers academically.

A girl's social relationships also affect her attitude toward teenage parenthood. High-risk girls tend to start dating earlier and to have a mother or sister who gave birth as a teenager. These girls also tend to date older males and to be ambivalent about teenage parenthood (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, April, 1997, p. 2).

Teenage pregnancy is sufficiently common now so that it is actually not the pregnancy per se that put teenage girls at risk for dropping out of school. They no longer suffer the social stigma that pregnant teens experienced 20 or 30 years ago. Rather, it is the decision to raise the baby that puts these girls at risk for dropping out, because the responsibilities of parenthood outweigh the need to stay in school.

Overview: Theoretical Approaches and Previous Studies

In communication literature about the effects of television on children and teenagers, many theories have been proposed concerning the correlation between behavior and television viewing. The influence of television on the socialization process has been debated since early television effects research began. Early television research evolved from study of limited effects to the study of powerful effects. By the mid-1960s, the dominant paradigm was the

effects of television violence on children, and research sought to establish a correlation between behavior and television viewing.

By the end of the 1960s, however, researchers began to turn their attention to the influence of media on the culture. More recent research has acknowledged the role of television, along with the roles of family, school, community, and peers in the cultivation process.

Since American society is mass mediated, cultural perspectives researchers argued that media can strongly influence viewer behavior in their environment (Baran & Davis, 1995, p. 291). Cultural perspective theories include cultivation analysis and social construction of reality. These theories assume that the experience of social reality is an ongoing process that is affected by media messages (p. 291). These messages--especially messages from television--validate, reinforce, and define the environment because television plays an often unnoticed but important role in the individual's daily life (Comstock, 1998, p. 18).

Cultivation Analysis

Developed by George Gerbner, cultivation analysis addresses questions about the role of media in society at the macroscopic level. "Television is the central and most pervasive mass medium in American culture and it plays a distinctive role" by providing a common, constant learning environment (Morgan & Signorielli, 1990, p. 13; Gerbner,

Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980, p. 14). According to Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1980), "cultivation analysis is the investigation of the consequences of this ongoing and pervasive system of cultural messages" (p. 14). It focuses on the relationships between television exposure and audience beliefs and behaviors. Television cultivates norms and reflects expected behaviors and reactions. It does not matter if the representations are accurate. If representations closely resemble what the viewer believes, then the perception makes them true. Thus, people tend to believe that the crime rate is much higher than the statistics actually reported (Baran & Davis, 1995, p. 302).

Comstock (1998) noted the ubiquity of television and its cradle-to-grave presence in the United States (p. 15). The pervasiveness of television makes it almost impossible to escape its influence. Television viewing is part of American life. According to Comstock (1998), "it ranks first among leisure activities and third in total time consumption behind sleep and school/work" (p. 15). More than 98% of American households have at least one television set, and the average set is turned on for over 7 hours a day (Comstock, 1998, p. 12; Morgan & Signorielli, 1990, p. 13). Consequently, television has become the primary source of information which provides a shared, centralized culture (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1994, p. 18).

Cultivation analysis raises questions about how cultivation occurs. Does family play a role? How about other social influences, such as school or friends? What roles do specific television programs play in cultivation? There are consistent, recurrent messages and values that are common to all programs, making the images and portrayals inescapable for regular viewers (Gerbner, et al., 1994, p. 25). Adolescents are particularly susceptible to such messages because they have fewer experiences and less information than adults (Morgan & Rothschild, 1983, p. 35). Television viewing, then, can define what it means to be a teenager in American society. Morgan and Rothschild (1983) concluded that television does indeed influence adolescent role cultivation, especially among teenage girls (p. 48). If a teenage girl consistently watches programs that feature thin, blond, sexy women, for example, she may get the impression that these women are symbols of beauty in American culture. Television can shape perceptions of what is beautiful, and maybe perceptions about acceptable behavior. This interaction with television is a process that starts in infancy and continues throughout life (Comstock, 1998, p. 15; Gerbner et. al., 1994, p. 19; Feinman, 1992, p. 3).

Past research in cultivation analysis focused on the depiction of violence on television. These studies found that television often exaggerated perceptions about acceptable ways to express anger or resolve problems.

Gerbner and Gross (1976) spearheaded the Cultural Indicators research which continued the work that was begun in these studies. Gerbner and Gross concluded that (pp. 173-174):

1. Television is essentially different from other media and research requires a new approach.
2. Television acts as the "cultural arm" of American society.
3. Television does not foster specific attitudes and opinions as much as it is a medium of socialization.
4. Television's major cultural function is to maintain the status quo.
5. Television's small, controversial, contributions are significant, no matter how small.

Signorielli (1990) associated heavy television viewing habits with a heightened sense of fear, danger, and general distrust of the world (p. 102). She found heavy viewers tend to believe that their peers and families are at greater risk of becoming victims of violence (p. 96). She also found that low income viewers are more apt to believe their environment is dangerous (p. 99). Similarly, Hawkins, Pingree, and Alder (1987) found that heavy television viewing is "associated with perceiving greater likelihood" that violence will occur (p. 559). Furthermore, Hawkins, et al. observed that younger adolescents were more susceptible to the effects of television (p. 572). Consequently, adolescents are more vulnerable than adults to what is

considered entertainment, inviting not only aggression, but also exploitation, because teenagers are more easily manipulated (Signorielli, 1990, p. 102; Hawkins, et al., 1987, p. 572). A surprising study by Larson and Kubey (1983) found that teenagers who spent more time with their families and who earned better grades than their peers also watched more television (p. 27). Perhaps this is an indication of the cultivation process at work. The study demonstrated that television reinforces the norms of the family, and that it represents a mode of conformity for youth (p. 27). The study also suggested that television provides adolescents with "an important chance to turn off strong emotions and regain control" (p. 27). However, this study seems invalid because most teenagers are in the process of seeking autonomy from their parents, and television alone does not invite conformity.

Researchers indicated that cultivation occurs in two ways: by mainstreaming and by resonance (Gerbner, et al., 1980, p. 10). Mainstreaming occurs when television becomes the dominant source of information through the use of common symbols and norms. Resonance occurs when viewers believe values on television that reinforce their everyday realities. George Gerbner (1990) identified the "3B's" of television as (p. 261):

1. The blurring of traditional distinctions of people's views of their world.
2. The blending of their realities into television's cultural mainstream.
3. The blending of that mainstream to the institutional interests of television and its sponsors.

Social Construction of Reality

In order for the construction of reality to occur, there has to be an interaction between the individual and society. Social referencing is the process of validation that takes place between a person and his or her environment (Feinman, 1992, p. 4). People make sense of their environment by observing the individuals around them (p. 7). According to Bandura (1994), the actions or reactions of other people also serve as social prompts for the individual (p. 76). Bandura (1994) maintained that people tend to adopt behaviors that do not conflict with their existing values (p. 83). Since television provides an infinite number of examples, the individual can construct reality from the characters in a program, especially if he or she perceives those characters as resonating reality.

Of course, the social construction of reality is not that simple. Many influences shape an individual's reality--including family, friends, and school. According to the social construction of reality theory, the mass media

play a role in how an individual forms reality, and how he or she determines what behaviors are appropriate.

Television influences social reality by reflecting the norms of society (Bandura, 1994, p. 75). It contributes to the viewer's conceptions of reality by relating to life situations (Gerbner, et al., 1980, p. 10). Members of the audience use media symbols to define their environment. These symbols are typically shared by other audience members to form a common reality. Social construction of reality works through typifications. Typifications enable viewers to quickly identify objects, concepts, and actions and then structure their behavior in response (Baran & Davis, 1995, p. 292). Certain ethnic groups may be portrayed stereotypically to move the plot along faster, for example. Typification is a quick way to assign meaning to the environment. Unfortunately, it can lead the audience to form stereotypical views, especially if television is their only frame of reference.

Hawkins and Pingree (1981) found that the influence of television is best defined in terms of its program content, and that heavy exposure shapes the viewer's beliefs and conceptions of reality (p. 349). The viewer symbolically interacts with the program content to construct reality, and therefore leads a person to match biases and perceptions from their own world (p. 349). In reviewing past studies that examined the influence of television on social reality,

Hawkins and Pingree (1982) concluded that the viewer's relationships with his or her own family also played an important role in his or her construction of reality. They maintained, however, that this did not lessen the role played by television. They stated that the influence of television could no longer be described as direct; rather, it "must be viewed as a complex process that takes place within individual contexts" (p. 245). Hawkins and Pingree (1982) added that further research was needed to explain how individuals use television to construct reality.

For adolescents as for other viewers, program content captures the attention and becomes real only if the viewer identifies with the representations (Peterson & Peters, 1983, p. 70). Since adolescents are typically self-exploring, these television representations become especially important when programs portray adolescents as behaving in more deviant ways than other groups. Content may "encourage the belief that heightened turmoil is part of the teenage role" (p. 77). For example, if a teenager is portrayed as troubled and preoccupied with sex and drugs, this portrayal may construct a "reality" that validates these behaviors.

Television and Violence

The *National Television Violence Study* (1997) greatly broadened the scope of studies in this field; it examined over 3,000 programs--20 times larger than previous studies. It also studied the violence ratings and antiviolence

messages to determine whether these ratings and messages minimized the effects of televised violence or altered viewer choices about violent programming. The authors concluded that television violence did not have the same effect on all viewers and that there were many contributors to violence in society (p. 2). They further acknowledged that the influence of televised violence depended on the characteristics of the audience, and on other societal influences as well. Thus a teenager can learn through television that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict, especially if he or she also lives in a violent environment. The *National Television Violence Study* (1997) offered five key findings about televised violence (vol. 1, p. 5):

1. The context in which most violence is presented on television poses a risk for viewers.
2. The negative consequences of violence are not often portrayed in programming.
3. Perpetrators mostly go unpunished.
4. Anti-violence messages are rarely seen in programming.
5. Televised violence is rarely explicit or graphic.

The study also found that repeated exposure to televised violence desensitizes the viewer, especially when violence is trivialized or presented in a humorous context (vol. 1, pp. 144-145).

The *National Television Violence Study* (1997) also created a national profile of adolescents to supply information for antiviolenace media campaigns. This profile provided valuable data on teenagers' attitudes toward, and experiences with violence. The study showed that violent teenagers also tended to be heavy viewers, and that they were more likely than their less violent peers to believe that television violence was portrayed accurately (vol. 2, p. 353). Since gun violence tended to be the most public concern, the study focused on two primary behaviors: physical violence and weapon possession (vol. 2, p. 337). Teenagers who reported taking part in physical violence or carrying a weapon were least likely to adopt the values of or seek advice from their parents. The more aggressive or violent teenagers were more likely to report divorce, single parenthood, low income, and physical abuse (vol. 2, pp. 340-343). Surprisingly, about one third of all teenagers did not feel safe in their schools. Students who carried weapons felt the least safe (vol. 2, p. 345). Similarly, aggressive teenagers also felt that they lived in a high-crime neighborhood where it was easy to obtain drugs and get involved with gangs, and to hard to get protection from police.

In a 20-year project, the Cultural Indicators researchers concluded that it did not matter how violence was presented on television. Children and adolescents learned

prosocial messages about violence whether it was presented in a comedy or a cartoon (Signorielli, Gerbner, & Morgan, 1995, p. 280). These authors further concluded that violent television content may contribute to negative perceptions of personal safety and create fear within the viewer about his or her environment (pp. 280-281). They found that television violence cultivated a sense that the world was dangerous, especially among children and less educated viewers. Heavy viewing of violent television was also associated with lower social mobility, lower academic aspirations, and greater anxiety about crime. Finally, this ongoing study concluded that television violence contributed to assumptions and myths about crime, law enforcement, and the likelihood of being a victim of violence.

Television and Sex

In a study that examined the influence of television on sexual learning, Roberts (1982) found that television often portrayed sex without responsibility or consequences. He found that television is full of innuendoes and references to sex, and that it manipulates how audiences interpret even the most subtle occurrences (p. 222). In addition, Roberts found that television rarely addresses contraceptive issues, sexually transmitted diseases, or promiscuity in prime-time programming (p. 222). According to Peterson and Peters (1983):

Television is one of the major vehicles for spreading the language of youth and its accompanying social realities throughout our society. The focus of these significant symbols tends to be lifestyle issues, including heterosexual relationships, sexuality . . . and the use of drugs and alcohol (p. 72).

In addition, Roberts (1982) identified four factors that contribute to a child's sexual socialization through television (p. 209):

1. the adult nature of most programming
2. limited knowledge and experience about sex
3. the realism of television
4. the consistency of messages about sex and sexuality

This construction of reality for children and adolescents may show all of the pleasures of sex without any of the responsibility. Specifically, more than 70% of sexual encounters depicted in the programs that Roberts studied occurred between unmarried partners (p. 222). Contraception was almost nonexistent; and HIV disease, venereal disease, and pregnancy were seldom discussed. When disease and pregnancy were discussed, they were often portrayed as a punishment for characters other than the main characters (p. 222).

Many teenagers receive most of their sex education through television (Roberts, 1982, p. 222). This is especially significant if they have no alternative sources of

information. Ironically, many teenagers learn about sex through television even though many parents do not believe in teaching about the use of contraceptives and pregnancy prevention in the schools.

Television and Substance Use

Television shapes adolescent attitudes on the use of substances as well. Weintraub-Austin and Meili (1994) examined the effects of how alcohol is portrayed on television. They found strong evidence that these portrayals exert a powerful effect on preteens and early teenagers (p. 431). These researchers found that family attitudes about drinking influenced adolescents more strongly than did television portrayals. However, they also found that "portrayals that seem desirable still can motivate children to want to emulate the characters they see drinking on television" (pp. 431-432). Thornton and Voigt (1984) in a study about television and delinquency, found that family exerted a stronger influence on adolescents than did television (p. 460). Thornton and Voigt (1984) also maintained that television showed a more positive relationship with aggression than with drug or alcohol abuse (p. 456). De Foe and Breed (1988) collaborated this finding in their study of alcohol portrayals on television. They found that less than 2% of all drinking on television was done by teenagers (p. 538). However, the teenage characters who did drink were associated with gangs or delinquent

activity (p. 538). This fact may influence at-risk youth, because they may have a tendency to take on behavior if it resonates with their lives. De Foe and Breed (1988) acknowledged, however, that television handles drinking with ambivalence, especially its portrayal of drinking among adults (p. 539). They found that television often portrayed drinking as a rite of passage, and that children and teenagers particularly looked forward to being old enough to drink their first drink (p. 538).

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Based on the background and theoretical framework, the present study will explore:

1. How much television is watched? What programs are most watched?
2. How often is sex mentioned? Is sexual content shown without repercussions and responsibility? How often does casual sex without commitment occur?
3. How do the television characters resolve problems? How often is violence used as a way to resolve conflict?
4. Does television content show drug and alcohol use? If so, in what context and with what attitudes? Do the main characters take drugs or alcohol without consequences?
5. Do the main characters exhibit risk factors associated with dropping out or failing high school? If so, how do they cope?

6. Is there a belief that the environment is violent or that there is more crime now than ten years ago?
7. Does sexual learning come from television?
8. Are drugs or alcohol perceived by at-risk youth as a way to have fun or escape problems?

In addition to exploring the research questions, this study will propose two hypotheses:

1. Television often portrays sex, violence, and substance use without any consequences, thereby giving youth at risk a double dose of cultivation because what they see resonates with their actual lives.
2. Television is more influential in the construction of reality for youth at risk than for youth not at risk.

Chapter 3

Method

Similar to previous research on the effects of television, this study employed a self-administered questionnaire and content analysis (Signorielli, et al., 1995, p. 282; Morgan & Signorielli, 1990, p. 19; Roberts, 1982, p. 210; Hawkins & Pingree, 1981, p. 362). A survey was used to identify the most-watched television programs and to determine students' attitudes toward violence in their environment, sexual learning, and drugs and alcohol. A content analysis was deemed appropriate to this type of study because it provided the best way to find out if program content contained messages that reinforced delinquent behavior in at-risk youth. It was also the best way to code events on television programs, and it had the added advantage of being unobtrusive (Babbie, 1998, pp. 309, 318).

Study Groups

Using an availability sample, the author surveyed youth at risk at Foothill High School in the Eastside Union High School District in Santa Clara County. An availability sample was necessary because this population group tended to be more difficult to survey especially since parent permissions were required. Foothill High School was chosen because most of its students were in danger of failing or dropping out of high school. There were approximately 450 students at Foothill (Western Association of Schools and

Colleges, 1998, p. 14); however, the student population fluctuated, because these teenagers moved around often. Approximately 72% of the students were Latino, 11% were Asian-Pacific, 9.5% were Caucasian, 6.5% were African American, and 1.4% were Native American (p. 3). A senior graduation summary reported that as of June 1997, there were 248 seniors of whom 42 seniors graduated (p. 9). Eighty-nine seniors (43%) passed all the proficiency tests, but did not have enough credits to graduate, and 117 seniors (57%) failed one or more proficiency tests and did not have enough credits to graduate (p. 9). Approximately 69% of the students at Foothill have been involved with the juvenile justice system (Nanci Quast-Bent, personal communication, April 1, 1998). At present, 23% are on probation (Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 1998, p. 8). Approximately 60% of the students used drugs, 76% were sexually active, and 34% were affiliated with or belonged to gangs (p. 8). Approximately 12.5% of the students were parents (p. 8).

A comparison survey using an availability sample was administered to students not considered at risk for failing or dropping out of school at Wilcox High School in the Santa Clara School District. Again, an availability sample was necessary because teacher and parent permissions were required for students to participate. Wilcox has a graduation rate of more than 90%.

Self-Administered Questionnaire

The author directed a self-administered questionnaire to determine the viewing habits of the study groups and to learn which programs they watched. In addition to their viewing habits, students were asked about their attitudes on crime, alcohol and drugs, and sexual learning.

Designed to meet the special needs of the students, Foothill's classes are team taught, and students attend either morning or afternoon classes that incorporate many subjects. The questionnaire was given to 188 students during nine morning and afternoon classes from October 19, 1998, through November 30, 1998. Two presentations were given to each class, with a final reminder during the last week of the survey period. This ensured a better response rate because many students missed school, enrolled late, or did not participate the first time.

The curriculum at Wilcox High School is more conventional and more structured. Therefore, the questionnaire was given during participating English classes, since 4 years of English are required for graduation. The author presented the questionnaire to nine classes from October 20, 1998, through November 30, 1998. Two presentations were given to 198 subjects, with a final reminder during the last week of the survey.

There were advantages to gathering evidence in this way. Students at Foothill were not inclined to take a survey voluntarily (Nanci Quast-Bent, personal communication, April 1, 1998). Therefore, a self-administered survey to a group of participants gathered at the same place and same time could be expected to have a higher response rate (Babbie, 1998, p. 257). Conducting a survey gave the author the opportunity to ask many questions about the students' viewing habits and about their perceptions of their environment. Measurement is stronger on standardized questionnaires because answers tend to be more uniform and less subjective (p. 273).

One disadvantage to questionnaires is that answers tend to represent the least common denominator (Babbie, 1998, p. 273). The researcher might find out what programs were watched but might not learn much about why the students watched specific programs. Unless students gave a detailed explanation, which with Foothill students was not likely, the researcher would get minimal qualitative results. Therefore, the survey included questions about attitudes on neighborhood crime and violence, sexual learning, and substance use. The questionnaire was designed to elicit the following data:

1. the 10 most watched television programs
2. if sexual learning came from television
3. if there was a belief that their environment is violent or there was more crime now than ten years ago

4. if drugs or alcohol were perceived as a way to have fun or escape problems

Sampling

Programs were taped in an availability sample over a seven week period from December 6, 1998, through January 20, 1999. One program a week was taped for each of the top 10 shows indicated on the surveys from each school. Taping was done over a seven week period to allow for scheduling conflicts, preempted programs, and taping errors. Programs that aired daily were taped four times during the 7 week period, beginning with a randomly selected day for the first week. To determine the first day, each day of the week was assigned a number from a table of random numbers, and the day was selected. For each week after, taping would be on the next consecutive day. For example, if the first week randomly began on a Tuesday, the second week's taping would be done Wednesday, and so on, until four shows had been taped.

Coding

To determine whether the programs supported the first hypothesis, the author focused on three major categories: sexual content, violence, and substance use. Each of these categories was broken down into several variables.

The first category, sexual content, was defined as any actions or innuendoes that promoted or acted out sexual activity, such as kissing, touching, embracing, or

intercourse. Also included were nonverbal cues, such as dressing provocatively, acting seductively, or acting flirtatiously. There were nine variables to code for sexual content: (a) kissing a nonfamily member; (b) embracing a non-family member; (c) verbal innuendo; (d) provocative dress including short skirts, cleavage, bathing suits, or any skimpy clothing; (e) seductive or flirtatious behavior; (f) intercourse; (g) any discussion about contraception, pregnancy, or sexually transmitted diseases; (h) main character shown as aggressor; (i) main character shown as submissive.

The definition of violence was similar to the one used in the Cultural Indicators research. Violence was the act of physical force, human or nonhuman, with or without a weapon, against self or others. It was the act of inflicting pain or killing. The coding also included acts of nature because television uses these purposefully (Signorielli, et al., 1995, p. 280). Again, there were nine variables to code. These were (a) using a weapon to kill or hurt; (b) threatening bodily harm; (c) rape; (d) violent act of nature, such as storms, crashes, or accidents; (e) main characters committing violent acts; (f) main characters as victims of violence; (g) gratuitous violence; (h) humorous violence; (i) cartoon violence.

Substance use was defined as the act of using any drug, including illicit drugs and prescription drugs other than

aspirin and vitamins. The use of alcohol was also included. There were eight variables (a) any substance use that entailed no consequences; (b) the use of hard drugs such as cocaine, heroin, or methamphetamines; (c) marijuana use; (d) alcohol use; (e) the use of prescription drugs; (f) content addressing problems such as addiction, overdose, or alcoholism; (g) main characters using drugs or alcohol; (h) main characters pushing drugs or alcohol.

Each incident was counted once per camera scene. A camera scene was defined as a complete series of camera shots within one place. If a scene switched to another scene and then back to the first scene, the depiction was counted as two incidents. When coding, some of the categories overlapped. For example, if a scene showed kissing and drinking wine, that counted as two incidents.

In addition, the author gathered independent variables from the survey to make correlations among the programs watched, the content of those programs, and the youths' perception about their environment. For example:

1. Was there a difference in programming that male or female students watch?
2. Was there a relationship between perceived violence in the environment and the amount of television watched?
3. Were there gender differences in the amount of television watched?

Reliability

If research is to be objective, there must be reliability (Holsti, 1969, p. 135). To ensure reliability, the author trained a second coder, who analyzed 25% of randomly selected programs. The second coder was shown how to code the specific variables in the categories of violence, sexual content, and substance use for a period of 2 weeks. The second coder analyzed a selection of one show for each week for each of the top 10 shows. Intercoder reliability was based on agreement between the two coders on specific variables in each category and was computed using Scott's π :

$$\pi = \frac{\% \text{ observed agreement} - \% \text{ expected agreement}}{1 - \% \text{ expected agreement}}$$

The advantage of using Scott's π was that it took into account the extent of intercoder agreement that might have resulted from chance (Holsti, 1969, p. 140).

Variables

To determine answers to the research questions, the author noted positive responses on the survey as well as results from the content analysis. From the survey, the following questions provided information about student viewing habits and their perceptions: How much television is watched? What programs are most watched? Is there a belief that the environment is violent, or that there is more crime now than ten years ago? Does sexual learning come from television? Are drugs or alcohol perceived by at-risk youth

as a way to have fun or escape problems? The content analysis determined answers to the following questions: How often is sex mentioned? Is sexual content shown without repercussions and responsibility? How often does casual sex without commitment occur? Do the main characters exhibit risk factors associated with dropping out or failing high school? How do they cope? How do the television characters resolve problems? How often is violence used as a way to resolve conflict? Does television content show drug and alcohol use? In what context and with what attitudes? Do the main characters take drugs or alcohol without consequences?

For hypothesis 1, the null hypothesis was that television does not equal cultivation and therefore does not influence youth at risk. The alternative hypothesis was that television does equal cultivation and therefore does influence youth at risk. The author analyzed three programs from each school that had the most violence, sexual content, and drug and alcohol use. The author also noted whether there was a perception of sexual learning from television, violence in the environment, and if drugs and alcohol were acceptable.

To determine sexual learning from television, the author quantified agreements with following statements on the survey: I admire the characters in my favorite TV programs; More often than not, TV reflects real life; I get most of my

news and information from TV; I get information about sex mostly from TV; I get information about sex mostly from my parents; I get information about sex mostly from my friends; TV teaches me things about sex that my parents don't; There is too much sex on TV; and Sex on TV is like real life for a maximum of 3 points for each time a student strongly agreed with a statement. If a student had a mean score of 14 or more points, then the author concluded that the student perceived that he or she had learned about sex by watching television.

To determine perception of violence in the environment, the author quantified agreements with the following statements on the survey: I admire the characters in my favorite TV programs; More often than not, TV reflects real life; I get most of my news and information from TV; Violence is like it is in real life; There is too much violence on TV; I have seen violence in my neighborhood; Fighting or using a weapon is ok if I'm defending myself; The crime rate is higher now than ten years ago; and The police are there to help in my neighborhood for 3 points for each time a student strongly agreed with a statement. If the student had 14 or more points, the author concluded the student perceived violence in their environment.

To determine whether drugs and alcohol were perceived as acceptable, the author quantified agreements with the following statements on the survey: I admire the characters

in my favorite TV programs; More often than not, TV reflects real life; I get most of my news and information from TV; I can't wait until I'm 21, so I can legally drink; Drinking helps me loosen up and be more outgoing; Drugs are ok as long as it doesn't get out of control' and Drinking is ok as long as it doesn't get out of control. A student was given 3 points for each time he or she strongly agreed with a statement for 21 possible points. The author concluded that students with 11 or more points had an acceptance of drugs and alcohol.

For hypothesis 2, the null hypothesis was that television has an equal influence on students at Foothill and at Wilcox. The alternative hypothesis was that television has more influence on students at Foothill than it has on students at Wilcox. To determine how much influence television has on students at both schools, the author quantified and compared answers to the following questions: How many hours of TV do you watch per week? I admire the characters in my favorite TV programs; More often than not, TV reflects real life; I get most of my news and information from TV; I get information about sex mostly from TV; I have a TV in my room; I watch TV for information; I learn more from TV than I learn at school; TV teaches me things about sex that my parents don't, on TV; Violence is like it is in real life; Sex on TV is like real life; I have seen violence in my

neighborhood, and The crime rate is higher now than ten years ago.

Method of Analysis

For hypothesis 1, three chi-square tests were used. The tests analyzed the elements of sexual content, violence, and drug and alcohol use within the three programs that had the highest rates of occurrence, and relationships between independent variables, such as student perceptions at Foothill. Three comparative tests were made with Wilcox programs and student perceptions. One advantage of the chi-square test was that it statistically shows whether variables operate independently of one another. It also determines the relationship between expected and observed behavior. A chi-square value at the 5% level of significance means that the chance of obtaining the measured association as a result of a sampling error is 5 in 100 (Babbie, 1998, p. 427).

The use of the chi-square test has some disadvantages as well. Although chi-square may rule out sampling errors, it does not unequivocally prove a relationship between variables. Tests of statistical significance are often "easily misinterpreted as strength of association or substantive significance" (Babbie, 1998, p. 430). However, tests of statistical significance are widely accepted in quantitative research because they can be useful for understanding data (p. 431).

For hypothesis 2, an independent t test was used to determine whether television had more influence on students at Foothill than on students at Wilcox.

For additional findings, an independent t test was used to determine the relationship between hours of television watched and perception of violence in the environment.

Chapter 4

Results

Student Response

At Foothill, the response rate was 54%, with 102 of 188 students returning a survey. There were 49 males and 53 females. Class breakdown included only sophomores, juniors, and seniors because there were not any freshmen at Foothill. Eleven were sophomores, 35 were juniors, and 55 were seniors. One student did not report year in school.

At Wilcox, the response rate was 51%, with 100 of 198 students returning a survey. There were 50 males and 50 females. Since Wilcox is a conventional high school, 16 were freshmen, 39 were sophomores, 28 were juniors, and 17 were seniors.

Weekly Viewing Hours

Viewing hours per week were similar for the two schools. Students at Foothill watched an average of up to 11 hours of television per week. Students at Wilcox watched an average of up to 9 hours per week. At Foothill, 51% of the students watched 1 to 10 hours of television a week compared to 42% at Wilcox watching 1 to 10 hours. Twenty-one percent of students at Foothill reported watching 11 to 15 hours of television a week. By comparison, only 8% of students at Wilcox watched as many hours. Sixteen percent of students at Foothill watched more than 20 hours per week while 19% at

Wilcox watched more than 20 hours. One person at each school reported watching no television.

Most-Watched Programs

The most-watched programs were determined by survey questions 4 and 20. Question 4 asked the students to list their three favorite programs. Question 20 asked students which television character they would want to be, and to indicate which show the character was from. At both schools, more students answered question 4 than question 20. At Foothill, 91% of the students answered question 4 and 64% of the students answered question 20. At Wilcox, 96% answered question 4 and 59% answered question 20.

Table 1 lists the 10 most-watched programs at Foothill and Wilcox. The number of times each program was mentioned is shown in the parentheses. Although the order of preference was different, 6 common programs made the most-watched list at both schools. These programs were *The Simpsons*, *Friends*, *South Park*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, and *Charmed*. In all, there were 14 most-watched programs between the two schools. Two of Foothill's top 3 programs were cartoons. Both schools had *The Simpsons* as the most-favorite program. At Wilcox, *Dawson's Creek* tied with *The Simpsons* as the most-watched program.

Table 1

The Most-Watched Television Programs at Foothill and Wilcox
High Schools

Foothill

The Simpsons(22)

The Jerry Springer Show(18)

South Park(17)

Beverly Hills 90210(13)

Fresh Prince of Bel Air(10)

Days of Our Lives(8)

Home Improvement(8)

Charmed(6)

Friends(6)

Unhappily Ever After(6)

Wilcox

Dawson's Creek(20)

The Simpsons(20)

Felicity(13)

Friends(11)

Charmed(9)

Beverly Hills 90210(8)

Fresh Prince of Bel Air(8)

South Park(8)

WWF Wrestling(8)

Wayans Brothers(7)

Most-Mentioned Characters

In addition to their favorite programs, students were asked to name their favorite television characters. Students at both schools were less inclined to answer this question about their favorite character as previously noted. When they did, students at each school named a wide range of characters. Therefore, no one mentioned a character more than 5 times at either school and most characters were mentioned only twice.

Table 2 lists the characters from each school that were mentioned at least twice. The number of times each character was mentioned is shown in the parentheses. At Foothill, there were eight most-mentioned characters. Four students chose Bart Simpson from *The Simpsons*. Students also mentioned two other fantasy characters--Cartman from *South Park* and Superman. The rest of the characters were from dramas and comedies.

At Wilcox, there were 10 most-mentioned characters. Five students chose Joey from *Dawson's Creek*. Wilcox students also mentioned 5 characters from fantasy shows--Alissa Milano, who portrays a witch on *Charmed*; Cartman from *South Park*; Homer from *The Simpsons*; Sabrina from *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*; and Tommy from *Rugrats*. The other 5 characters were from dramas and comedies.

Table 2

The Most-Mentioned Television Characters at Foothill and
Wilcox High Schools

Foothill

Bart - The Simpsons(4)

Alissa Milano - Charmed(2)

Cartman - Southpark(2)

Jerry Springer(2)

Meg Cummings - Sunset Beach(2)

Superman(2)

Valerie - 90210(2)

Will Smith - Fresh Prince(2)

Wilcox

Joey - Dawson's Creek(5)

Keri Russel - Felicity(3)

Alissa Milano - Charmed(2)

Cartman - Southpark(2)

Homer - The Simpsons(2)

Moesha - Moesha(2)

Sabrina - Sabrina The Teenage

Witch(2)

Stone Cold Steve Austin-WWF(2)

Tommy - Rugrats(2)

Will Smith - Fresh Prince(2)

Content Analysis

From the content analysis, the author determined the three programs that had the most sexual content, the most violence, and the most drug and alcohol use at each school. The content analysis of the 14 programs chosen by the students at both schools counted 3,449 acts of violence, 1,675 sexual acts, and 832 acts of substance use for a total of 5,956 coding decisions. A total of 42 programming hours were taped. The results were divided into incidents per half hour to easily compare one-hour programs to half-hour programs. Table 3 shows the content analysis of Foothill programs. There was an average of 17.7 incidents of sexual content, 33.5 incidents of violence, and 7.9 incidents of substance use per half hour of programming. In addition, Table 4 shows main characters committed an average of 3.9 acts of sexual behavior, 3.2 acts of violence, and 1 act of substance use per half hour of Foothill programming.

The most violent Foothill programs were also the most-watched programs: *The Simpsons*, *The Jerry Springer Show*, and *South Park*. Foothill programs that had the most sexual content were *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Unhappily Ever After*, and *South Park*. *Beverly Hills 90210*, *The Simpsons*, and *Friends* had the most substance use.

The results were somewhat different for the 10 Wilcox programs. The content analysis on Table 5 shows Wilcox

programs had an average of 15.5 incidents of sexual behavior, 42.7 incidents of violence, and 11.6 incidents of substance use per half hour of programming. Table 6 shows that in a half hour, main characters committed 10 acts of violence, 3.8 sexuals acts, and 0.8 act of substance use in Wilcox programs.

The most violent Wilcox programs were *WWF Wrestling*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park*. It should also be noted that these programs were more fantasy than realistic. Of the 10 Wilcox programs, *Beverly Hills 90210*, *South Park*, and *Friends* had the most sexual content. The Wilcox programs that had the most substance use were the same as the Foothill programs: *Beverly Hills 90210*, *The Simpsons*, and *Friends*.

Table 3

Content Analysis of Foothill Programs (Incidents Per Half Hour)

Sexual Content

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Average
Beverly Hills 90210	12	33.5	43	62	37.6
Unhappily Ever After	32	27	21	34	28.5
South Park	44	4	7	53	27.0
Friends	22	26	27	13	22.0
Days of Our Lives	17.5	10	11	48	21.6
Charmed	14.5	4	17	6.5	10.5
Fresh Prince	19	4	6	5	8.5
Home Improvement	5	5	1	20	7.8
Jerry Springer Show	16.5	3.5	7	1	7.0
The Simpsons	11	0	12	2	6.3
Overall Average					17.7

Violent Content

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Average
The Simpsons	76	78	240	84	119.5
South Park	234	102	58	42	109.0
Jerry Springer Show	92	59	24	59	58.5
Charmed	9.5	19.5	17.5	14	15.1
Unhappily Ever After	4	14	5	37	15.0
Beverly Hills 90210	11.5	2.5	5.5	5	6.1
Fresh Prince	0	16	5	0	5.3
Days of Our Lives	4	3	2.5	9	4.6
Home Improvement	6	2	0	0	2.0
Friends	0	0	0	1	.3
Overall Average					33.5

Substance Use

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Average
Beverly Hills 90210	20	19	6.5	43.5	22.3
The Simpsons	55	1	14	10	21.8
Friends	11	28	4	0	10.8
Charmed	12.5	0	16.5	1	7.5
Unhappily Ever After	8	6	6	6	6.5
Fresh Prince	2	6	0	9	4.3
South Park	6	1	0	6	3.3
Days of Our Lives	0	2	7	1	2.5
Home Improvement	0	0	0	0	0.0
Jerry Springer	0	0	0	0	0.0
Overall Average					7.9

Table 4

Content Analysis of Foothill Programs: Main CharactersCommitting Acts (Incidents Per Half Hour)

Sexual Content

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Average
Beverly Hills 90210	2	13	13.5	20	12.1
Days of Our Lives	5.5	3	5	21.5	8.8
Friends	4	6	6	2	4.5
Unhappily Ever After	3	3	1	9	4.0
Home Improvement	2	1	0	9	3.0
Charmed	1	1.5	5	0.5	2.0
Fresh Prince	5	0	1	0	1.5
The Simpsons	3	0	3	0	1.5
Jerry Springer Show	4	1	0	0	1.3
South Park	2	0	0	1	.8
			Overall Average		3.9

Violent Content

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Average
The Simpsons	0.5	16	20	5	10.4
Jerry Springer Show	12.5	7.5	2.5	6	7.1
South Park	4	10	5	5	6.0
Unhappily Ever After	2	1	0	8	2.8
Charmed	1.5	2	2	2	1.9
Beverly Hills 90210	3	0	1.5	1.5	1.5
Fresh Prince	0	3	2	0	1.3
Days of Our Lives	1	0	1	0.5	.6
Home Improvement	1	0	0	0	.3
Friends	0	0	0	0	.0
			Overall Average		3.2

Substance Use

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Average
Beverly Hills 90210	4.5	2	1.5	4.5	3.1
The Simpsons	6	1	3	0	2.5
Days of Our Lives	0	1	2.5	1	1.1
Friends	0	4	0	0	1.0
Unhappily Ever After	0	2	0	2	1.0
South Park	2	1	0	0	.8
Charmed	0.5	0	1.5	1	.5
Fresh Prince	0	0	0	0	.0
Home Improvement	0	0	0	0	.0
Jerry Springer	0	0	0	0	.0
			Overall Average		1.0

Table 5

Content Analysis of Wilcox Programs (Incidents Per Half Hour)**Sexual Content**

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Average
Friends	22	26	27	13	22.0
Beverly Hills 90210	12	33.5	43	62	37.6
South Park	44	4	7	53	27.0
Dawson's Creek	33	11.5	15.5	1	15.3
Wayans Brothers	7	21	26	3	14.3
Charmed	14.5	4	17	6.5	10.5
Fresh Prince	19	4	6	5	8.5
Felicity	10.5	13.5	1	2	6.8
WWF Wrestling	5.5	2	9.5	10.5	6.9
The Simpsons	11	0	12	2	6.3
			Overall Average		15.5

Violent Content

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Average
WWF Wrestling	102.5	176	170	150	149.6
The Simpsons	76	78	240	84	119.5
South Park	234	102	58	42	109.0
Wayans Brothers	17	0	53	9	19.7
Charmed	9.5	19.5	17.5	14	15.1
Beverly Hills 90210	11.5	2.5	5.5	5	6.1
Fresh Prince	0	16	5	0	5.3
Felicity	0	0.5	0	8.5	2.3
Dawson's Creek	0	1	0	0	.3
Friends	0	0	0	1	.3
			Overall Average		42.7

Substance Use

	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Average
Beverly Hills 90210	20	19	6.5	43.5	22.3
The Simpsons	55	1	14	10	21.8
Friends	11	28	4	0	10.8
Charmed	12.5	0	16.5	1	7.5
Fresh Prince	2	6	0	9	4.3
Wayans Brothers	2	6	2	5	3.8
South Park	6	1	0	6	3.3
Dawson's Creek	5	2.5	0	0	1.9
Felicity	1	2	2	0	1.3
WWF Wrestling	0	0	0	2	.5
			Overall Average		11.6

Table 6

Content Analysis of Wilcox Programs: Main CharactersCommitting Acts (Incidents Per Half Hour)

Sexual Content					
	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Average
Beverly Hills 90210	2	13	13.5	20	12.1
Dawson's Creek	22	10	9	0	10.3
Friends	4	6	6	2	4.5
Felicity	2	6	0.5	0.5	2.3
Wayans Brothers	0	3	5	1	2.3
Charmed	1	1.5	5	0.5	2.0
Fresh Prince	5	0	1	0	1.5
The Simpsons	3	0	3	0	1.5
WWF Wrestling	1	0	2	1.5	1.1
South Park	2	0	0	1	.8
Overall Average					3.8

Violent Content					
	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Average
WWF Wrestling	48.5	77	85	89	74.9
The Simpsons	0.5	16	20	5	10.4
South Park	4	10	5	5	6.0
Wayans Brothers	4	0	10	0	3.5
Charmed	1.5	2	2	2	1.9
Beverly Hills 90210	3	0	1.5	1.5	1.5
Fresh Prince	0	3	2	0	1.3
Felicity	0	0	0	2.5	.6
Dawson's Creek	0	0	0	0	0
Friends	0	0	0	0	0
Overall Average					10.0

Substance Use					
	Program 1	Program 2	Program 3	Program 4	Average
Beverly Hills 90210	4.5	2	1.5	4.5	3.1
The Simpsons	6	1	3	0	2.5
Friends	0	4	0	0	1.0
South Park	2	1	0	0	.8
Charmed	0.5	0	1.5	1	.5
Dawson's Creek	1	0.5	0	0	.4
Felicity	0	0.5	0	0	.1
Fresh Prince	0	0	0	0	0
WWF Wrestling	0	0	0	0	0
Wayans Brothers	0	0	0	0	0
Overall Average					.8

Reliability

The second coder coded 25% of the programs with a Scott's pi reliability of .85. The programs were a random sample of each show for a total of 14 programs. Table 7 shows that coder 1 recorded 729 acts of violence, 358 sexual acts, and 153 acts of substance use. Coder 2 recorded 727 acts of violence, 291 sexual acts, and 109 acts of substance use. There were 1,091 coding agreements between coder 1 and coder 2, indicating a high degree of reliability.

Table 7

Reliability of Coder 1 and Coder 2

Program	Coder 1			Coder 2			Agree
	Violence	Sex	Drugs/ Alcohol	Violence	Sex	Drugs/ Alcohol	
Beverly Hills 90210	5	67	38	4	39	33	70
Charmed	19	29	25	16	28	26	67
Days of Our Lives	8	35	0	9	27	0	30
Dawson's Creek	0	66	10	0	65	6	64
Felicity	0	21	2	0	21	2	19
Fresh Prince	0	19	2	0	13	2	14
Friends	0	22	11	0	20	11	48
Home Improvement	6	5	0	6	2	0	7
Jerry Springer	184	33	0	192	29	0	211
The Simpsons	76	11	55	70	16	22	94
South Park	58	7	0	54	6	0	59
WWF Wrestling	352	4	0	356	5	0	356
Wayans Brothers	17	7	2	15	7	0	20
Unhappily Ever After	4	32	8	5	13	7	32
Coding Decisions	729	358	153	727	291	109	
Total coding decisions in sample: 2,367				Agreements: 1,091			
%violence: .62							
%sex: .27							
%substance: .11							

expected agreements: .47   observed agreements: .92   Scott's pi: .85

Sexual Content

How often was sex mentioned? Was sexual content shown without repercussions or responsibility? How often did casual sex occur without commitment?

In the 10 Foothill programs, sexual content was shown an average of 17.7 times per half hour. Main characters committed 3.9 sexual acts per half hour. Of the three most-watched programs, *The Simpsons*, had an average of 6.3 incidents, *The Jerry Springer Show* had an average of 7 acts and *South Park* had an average 27 incidents per half hour. The main characters from these shows committed 1.5, 1.3, and 0.8 sex acts per half hour respectively.

Most sex in the Foothill programs was shown without repercussions or responsibilities. Most content was counted in the areas of provocative dress and innuendo. However, there were 12 acts of sexual intercourse and 44 acts of flirtatious or seductive behavior with only 3 responsible discussions. When any discussion did occur, it was about commitment in the relationship. In the 10 Foothill programs, there was no discussion about birth control, disease or unwanted pregnancies. However in Foothill programs, sex occurred most often within a committed relationship. Only 3 acts of sexual intercourse occurred without a commitment; however, commitments were short term.

There was slightly more sexual content in the 10 Wilcox programs, which had an average of 18 incidents per half hour. However, the main characters in the Wilcox programs engaged in slightly less sexual behavior than the main characters from Foothill programs, with 3.8 incidents per half hour. The most-watched Wilcox programs, *Dawson's Creek*, *The Simpsons*, and *Felicity*, had an average of 15.3, 6.3, and 6.8 incidents per half hour respectively. The main characters in these programs 10.3 acts, 1.5 acts, and 2.3 acts per half hour respectively.

Like the Foothill programs, the Wilcox programs showed sex without commitment or repercussions. There were 10 acts of sexual intercourse and 49 acts of seductive behavior in the 10 Wilcox programs. However, there were 7 discussions about responsibility. Three discussions were shown on *Dawson's Creek*, one of the most-watched programs at Wilcox. Two of the discussions were about teen pregnancy and one was about commitment within a sexual relationship. In addition, one of the discussions about birth control took place with Joey from *Dawson's Creek*, the most-mentioned character at Wilcox. The other discussions in the other programs dealt only with commitment. The Wilcox programs did show sex mostly within a relationship. Only 3 acts of sexual intercourse occurred outside a relationship. However, the relationships were quick to start or very short lived. Sex

was introduced at the beginning of the relationship and none of the acts of sexual intercourse occurred within a marriage.

Violence and Problem Resolution

How did main characters resolve problems? How often was violence used as a way to resolve conflict?

Violent content was the most pervasive element within all programs chosen by students at both schools. In the Foothill programs, there were 33.5 violent acts per half hour of programming. Main characters committed an average of 3.2 violent acts per half hour. The three most-watched Foothill programs were also the three programs that had the most violence. *The Simpsons* had an average of 119.5 violent acts, and main characters committed an average of 10.4 violent acts per half hour. *The Jerry Springer Show* had an average of 58.5 violent acts, and main characters committed an average of 7.1 violent acts per half hour. *South Park* had an average of 109 violent acts per half hour, and the main characters committed an average of 6 violent acts per half hour.

In Foothill's three most-watched programs, violence was the main method of conflict resolution. In all, the most common type of violence was using a weapon to hurt or kill including slapping, hitting, and punching. There was no discussion in any of the three Foothill programs to resolve conflict. In *The Simpsons*, the main characters were more often aggressors, committing 45 acts per half hour; they were victims 33 times per half hour. In *The Jerry Springer Show*,

main characters were aggressors about as often as they were victims. In *South Park*, the main characters were victims almost twice as often as being aggressors--53 times as opposed to 24 times per half hour. In the three most violent Foothill programs, violence was either expected or was not taken seriously because the programs did not represent the realism portrayed in dramas.

Wilcox programs had significantly more violence than Foothill programs. There were 42.7 violent acts per half hour in the Wilcox programs, and main characters committed an average of 10 violent acts per half hour. Of the three most-watched Wilcox programs, *The Simpsons* averaged of 119.5 violent acts, *Dawson's Creek* averaged 0.3 violent acts, and *Felicity* had 2.3 violent acts per half hour. *Dawson's Creek* and *Felicity* had the lowest rate of violence of all the Wilcox programs. None of the main characters from either program used violence as a way to resolve conflicts. In fact, none of the main characters from *Dawson's Creek* committed any violence. On *Felicity*, main characters committed an average of 0.6 violent acts per half hour.

Only one of the three most-watched Wilcox programs, *The Simpsons*, was also among the most violent. The other two most violent Wilcox shows were *WWF Wrestling* with an average of 149.6 violent acts per half hour and *South Park* with an average of 109 violent act per half hour. *South Park* main characters committed 6 violent acts per half hour; as

previously noted were more often victims. *WWF Wrestling* was all violence and presented no other means of conflict resolution. The main characters in *WWF Wrestling* were aggressors as often as they were victims, committing an average of 74.9 acts of violence per half hour. *WWF Wrestling* was the most violent program watched by students at either school.

Substance Use

Did television content show drug and alcohol use? If so, in what context and with what attitudes? Did the main characters take drugs or alcohol without experiencing any consequences?

Two of Foothill's most-watched programs, *The Jerry Springer Show* and *South Park* showed very little substance use. The same held true for two of Wilcox's most-watched programs. *Dawson's Creek* averaged 1.88 incidents per half hour and *Felicity* averaged 1.25 incidents per half hour. *The Simpsons*, however had one of the highest ratings for substance use, 21.75 incidents per half hour. In addition, the main characters used drugs or alcohol an average of 2.5 times per half hour.

For both schools, the same programs ranked higher in the substance use--*The Simpsons*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, and *Friends*. *Beverly Hills 90210* had the highest rating, with 22.8 incidents per half hour. Main characters committed 3.1 incidents per half hour. *Friends* averaged 10.8 incidents in

a half hour and main characters committed 1 incident per half hour.

Most substance use was gratuitous. In *The Simpsons*, the main substance was alcohol. There were 24 gratuitous acts of substance use. In *Beverly Hills 90210*, main characters used a variety of substances. There were 14 incidents of heroin use, 1 incident of marijuana use, and 80 incidents of alcohol use. There was one act of addressing problems. In *Friends*, the main substance use was alcohol with 14 incidents. There were 9 incidents of marijuana use. *Dawson's Creek* was the only program that showed the consequences of using too much alcohol, although no discussion took place.

Main Characters and Risk Factors

The results of the content analysis indicated that some main characters clearly exhibited the risk factors for failing or dropping out of high school. At Foothill, the most admired character was Bart Simpson. *The Simpsons* had one of the highest rates of violence and substance abuse. The main characters often relied on violence or alcohol to resolve problems. At Wilcox, the most admired character was Joey on *Dawson's Creek*. This program had one of the lowest rates of violence and substance abuse. Sexual content was comparatively higher. However, Joey took part in one of the few responsible discussions about sex.

Student Perceptions

Did students believe that their environment was violent, or that there was more crime now than ten years ago? Did student learn about sex from television? Did they believe using drugs or alcohol was an acceptable way to have fun?

At Foothill, 63% of the students reported seeing violence in their neighborhood, and 32% stated that it was acceptable to fight or use a weapon in self-defense. Sixty-seven percent believed that there was more crime now than 10 years ago. Only 33% believed that the police were there to help.

With respect to sexual learning, only 13% of Foothill students said they had received their information mostly from television. Twenty percent said that television had taught them more about sex than their parents did. Only 15% reported learning about sex mostly from their parents. Twenty-four percent believed that television portrayed sex accurately.

Using drugs and alcohol seemed to be an acceptable way to have fun at Foothill. Alcohol was more acceptable than drugs. Thirty-three percent of the students believed that there was nothing wrong with drinking as long as it did not get out of control. Furthermore, 37% of the students said they could not wait until they could legally drink. Drug use

was considered acceptable by 24% of the students as long as it did not get out of control.

At Wilcox, perceptions about sexual learning, violence, and substance use were different. Only 25% of these students reported seeing violence in their neighborhoods. However, 43% of students at Wilcox believed that it was acceptable to fight or use a weapon in self-defense. Sixty-four percent of the students at Wilcox believed that the crime rate was higher now than ten years ago and 41% believed that the police were there to help.

More students at Wilcox, 20% said that they had learned about sex mainly from television. Twenty-six percent said that television had taught them things about sex that their parents did not. However, 17% received information about sex mostly from their parents. Only 15% thought that television portrayed sex accurately.

Drug and alcohol acceptance was lower at Wilcox. Twenty percent of those surveyed could not wait until they were 21 to drink. As at Foothill, drinking was more acceptable than using drugs. Twenty-eight percent of the students at Wilcox said that drinking was acceptable as long as it did not get out of control, and only 9% thought drug use was acceptable. Figure 1 compares Foothill students to Wilcox students about perceptions and beliefs.

Figure 1. Comparison of Foothill students and Wilcox students about their perceptions and beliefs.

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis proposed in this study was that television often portrays sex, violence, and substance use without any consequences, thereby giving youth-at-risk a double dose of cultivation because what they see resonates with their actual lives. This hypothesis was measured by three chi-square tests for each school. The chi-square tests compared the relationships between sexual learning, perceived violence in the environment, and acceptance of drugs and alcohol respectively with the three programs that had the most sexual content, violence, and drugs and alcohol from each school.

Table 8 illustrates the relationship between sexual learning and watching *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Unhappily Ever After*, and *South Park* for Foothill students. The chi-square value was $\chi^2 = 1.8$, which failed to reject the null hypothesis at the .05 level ($\chi^2 = 3.8$). Table 8 illustrates the relationship between perceived violence in the environment and watching *The Simpsons*, *The Jerry Springer Show*, and *South Park*. The chi-square value was $\chi^2 = .3$, which failed to reject the null hypothesis at the .05 level. Table 8 illustrates the relationship between accepting drugs and alcohol as fun and watching *Beverly Hills 90210*, *The Simpsons*, and *Friends* for Foothill students. The chi-square

value was $x^2 = .8$, which failed to reject the null hypothesis at the .05 level.

Thus the chi-square analysis did not statistically support hypothesis 1 with Foothill students. Thirty percent of the students at Foothill watched the most violent television programs and also believed their environment was violent. Thirty-seven percent of the students at Foothill perceived violence in their environment, however, they did not watch the most violent programs. Sixteen percent of Foothill students learned about sex from television and they watched programs with the most sexual content. Thirty percent of Foothill students also said they learned about sex from television, but, they did not watch the programs with the most sexual content. Thirteen percent of Foothill students watched the programs with the most drugs and alcohol content and they also found drugs and alcohol as an acceptable way to have fun. An additional 27% reported drug and alcohol acceptance, but did not watch the programs with the most content.

Overall, 59% of the students at Foothill reported perceptions of violence in their neighborhood, sexual learning from television, or drugs and alcohol acceptable as well as watching the programs with the most sexual content, violence and drugs and alcohol.

Table 8

Chi-Square Analysis of Hypothesis 1: Sexual Learning,
Perception of Violence, and Acceptance of Drugs and Alcohol
at Foothill High School

	<u>Learned about</u> <u>sex from TV</u> (n = 47)	<u>Did not learn</u> <u>about sex from TV</u> (n = 55)
watched programs	34%	22%
did not watch	66	78

$$\chi^2 = (1, N = 102) = 1.8 > .05$$

	<u>Perception of</u> <u>violence</u> <u>in environment</u> (n = 69)	<u>No perception of</u> <u>violence</u> <u>in environment</u> (n = 33)
watched programs	45%	39%
did not watch	55	61

$$\chi^2 = (1, N = 102) = .3 > .05$$

	<u>Acceptance of</u> <u>drugs and alcohol</u> (n = 40)	<u>No acceptance of</u> <u>drugs and alcohol</u> (n = 62)
watched programs	33%	24%
did not watch	67	76

$$\chi^2 = (1, N = 102) = .8 > .05$$

Chi-square analysis did not statistically support hypothesis 1 at Wilcox either. Table 9 illustrates the relationship between sexual learning and watching *Beverly Hills 90210*, *South Park*, and *Friends* for Wilcox students. The chi-square value was $\chi^2 = .8$, which failed to reject the null hypothesis at the .05 level ($\chi^2 = 3.8$). Table 9 illustrates the relationship between perceived violence in the environment and watching *WWF Wrestling*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park*. The chi-square value was $\chi^2 = 3.3$, which failed to reject the null hypothesis at the .05 level. Table 9 illustrates the relationship between accepting drugs and alcohol as fun and watching *Beverly Hills 90210*, *The Simpsons*, and *Friends* for Wilcox. The chi-square value was $\chi^2 = 1.9$, which again failed to reject the null hypothesis at the .05 level.

At Wilcox, only 9% of the students watched the most violent television programs and also believed that their environment was violent. Sixteen percent of the students perceived violence in their environment, however, they did not watch the most violent programs. Only 2% of Wilcox students said they learned about sex from television and also watched the programs with the most sexual content. Eighteen percent said they learned about sex from television, but did not watch the programs with the most sexual content. Six percent of the students at Wilcox watched the programs with the most drug and alcohol content and they also found

drugs and alcohol acceptable. Another 7% reported drug and alcohol acceptance, but did not watch the programs with the most content.

Overall, 30% of the students at Wilcox compared to 59% at Foothill reported perceptions of violence in their neighborhood, sexual learning from television, or drugs and alcohol acceptable as well as watching programs with the most content.

Table 9

Chi-Square Analysis of Hypothesis 1 (continued): Sexual Learning, Perception of Violence, and Acceptance of Drugs and Alcohol at Wilcox High School

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	<u>Learned about sex from TV</u> (n = 20)	<u>Did not learn about sex from TV</u> (n = 80)
watched programs	10%	19%
did not watch	90	81
$\chi^2 = (1, N = 100) = .8 > .05$		

	<u>Perception of violence in environment</u> (n = 25)	<u>No perception of violence in environment</u> (n = 75)
watched programs	35%	17%
did not watch	65	83
$\chi^2 = (1, N = 100) = 3.3 > .05$		

	<u>Acceptance of drugs and alcohol</u> (n = 13)	<u>No acceptance of drugs and alcohol</u> (n = 87)
watched programs	46%	26%
did not watch	54	74
$\chi^2 = (1, N = 100) = 1.9 > .05$		

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis proposed in this study was that television is more influential in the construction of reality for youth at risk than for youth not at risk. The null hypothesis was that television has an equal influence on both groups. Statistical evidence rejected the null hypothesis. Table 10 shows independent t test which revealed that television has more influence on youth at risk ($p < .05$, critical value 1.65) than it has on youth who are not at risk. The t value was 3.98, which favors the alternative hypothesis.

Fifty-one percent of students at Foothill watched from 1 to 10 hours of television a week. Sixteen percent of students at Foothill revealed they watched more than 20 hours a week. Sixty-nine percent of students at Foothill had a television set in their room.

Forty percent of the students at Foothill said that television reflected real life. Fifty-nine percent of students from Foothill received most news and information from television. However, only 12% said they learned more from television than they learned from school. Twenty percent of students reported that television teaches them about sex and 24% of students at Foothill said that television portrayed sex accurately. Thirty-five percent of students thought violence was accurately portrayed.

Forty-two percent of students at Wilcox watched from 1 to 10 hours of television a week. Nineteen percent of students at Wilcox said they watched more than 20 hours a week. Sixty-five percent had a television in their room.

Twenty-seven percent students at Wilcox said that television reflected real life. Fifty-six percent of students received most of their news and information from television, however, only 7% of students at Wilcox said they learned more from television than they learned from school. Twenty-six percent of Wilcox students said that television taught them about sex and 15 students said that television portrayed sex accurately. Only 17 students at Wilcox thought violence was accurately portrayed.

Table 10

Independent T Test: Television's Influence on Youth at Risk
and Youth Not at Risk

	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Foothill	102	16.24*	5.24
Wilcox	100	13.56*	4.26

Mean difference = .98

*based on a summation of scores from selected survey
questions: the higher the mean, the greater the influence

t test for Equality of Means

Variance	Critical Value	<u>t</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>p</u>
unequal	1.65	3.98	193.37	.05

Additional Findings

The results from both schools indicated that there was a difference in the type of programming male and female students watched. At Foothill, male students watched more violent programs than nonviolent programs. Fourteen male students watched *The Simpsons* compared to 8 female students. *South Park* was more evenly split with 9 male and 8 female students. More female students at Foothill watched *The Jerry Springer Show* than male students.

Gender did not make much difference when it came to the programs with the most sexual content. Male students who watched *Unhappily Ever After* outnumbered female students 5 to 1 at Foothill and more female students watched *Beverly Hills 90210* than male students at Foothill. In overall content, female students at Foothill watched more programs with a higher incidence of sex.

There were gender differences at Foothill for programs with the most drug and alcohol content. More female students at Foothill watched *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Friends*. *The Simpsons* was also one of the shows with the most drug and alcohol content and more male students at Foothill watched.

The results from Wilcox also indicated that male and female students watched different types of programming. At Wilcox, more male students than female students watched the three most violent programs. No female students watched *WWF*

Wrestling. Sixteen male students watched *The Simpsons* compared to 4 female students. Male students outnumber female students 3 to 1 when watching *South Park*. Female students at Wilcox watched the least violent programs.

More female students than male students at Wilcox watched the programs with the most sexual content. No male students at Wilcox watched *Beverly Hills 90210*, as compared to female students. More female students watched *Friends* and more male students watched *South Park*.

There were also some gender differences at Wilcox when it came to watching the programs with the most drug and alcohol content. As at Foothill, more female students watched *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Friends*, and more male students watched *The Simpsons*. Female students watched more of the programs with the most drug and alcohol content.

A comparison of Foothill students with Wilcox students, revealed that Foothill students perceived more violence in their environment even though students at both schools watched the same amount of television--an average of 11 to 15 hours per week. Table 11 shows the results of a t test indicating that there was a relationship between the amount of television watched and perception of violence in the environment for Foothill students. Overall, more male than female students perceived more violence at both schools, although there seemed to be no gender differences in the hours spent watching television.

Table 11

Independent T Test: Amount of Television Watched and
Perceived Violence

	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Foothill	102	15*	2.82
Wilcox	100	11.5*	2.12

Mean difference = .98

*based on a summation of scores from selected survey
 questions: the higher the mean, the greater the influence

t test for Equality of Means

Variance	Critical Value	<u>t</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>p</u>
unequal	6.3	7	1	.05

Discussion

The television programs viewed by teenagers today may portray characters who exhibit risk factors associated with dropping out of high school. These portrayals could validate delinquent behavior, especially for those teenagers who are considered at risk. However, television does not have the same effect on all viewers, and there may be many contributors to the construction of reality for teenagers at risk.

The at-risk youth at Foothill and the control group at Wilcox seemed to watch the same amount of television each week. The two groups, had six favorite programs. Perhaps this was because these programs generally appealed to teenagers, regardless of whether a youth was considered at risk for dropping out of high school. However, watching television seemed to affect the two groups differently.

The Simpsons was the most-watched program at both schools. Foothill students listed Bart Simpson as their most admired character. Bart Simpson was questionable as a role model, because he used violence and deceit to solve problems and he had little respect for authority. *Dawson's Creek* tied for the most-watched program at Wilcox. Students picked one of the show's main characters, Joey, as their most admired character. Joey was a more positive role model than Bart Simpson. She did not give into peer pressure about drinking and sex. Education was important to her. Possibly, students

that may be why she was admired. Perhaps, the students at Foothill may not have had that much in common with this type of character and they could relate better to Bart Simpson. Furthermore, two of the most-watched programs at Foothill, *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, were cartoons, suggesting a portrayal of violence not based in reality. Violence in a cartoon may be overlooked or not taken as seriously as violence in a drama.

Perhaps one of the most striking findings to come out about this research was the extent that the television programs missed opportunities to educate teenage audiences. As previous research has suggested, sexual content was often presented without consequences or responsible behavior. The main characters were more concerned about gratification than about practicing safe sex, and they often had sex quickly after the first meeting or date. There were instant attractions and even faster commitments. If safe sex was mentioned at all, it was almost a justification for having sex so quickly. *Dawson's Creek* presented the only discussion about birth control--between the main character, Joey, and her boyfriend's mother. The discussion was somewhat awkward, reminiscent perhaps of how some teenagers might communicate with their parents.

Main characters used drugs and alcohol casually, without consequences or regard for the dangers. This disregard for

the dangers of drugs and alcohol could have reinforced students' attitudes about substance use. Almost one third of students at both schools felt that there was nothing wrong with drinking as long as it was under control. Since most television characters had their drinking under control, students probably did not get the message that drinking was dangerous.

One of the most popular shows, *Beverly Hills 90210*, had the highest drug content. Under the guise of trying to teach a lesson, *Beverly Hills 90210* often portrayed main characters behaving destructively and coming out of most situations unscathed. One of the main characters, Dillon, was a heroin addict. The show tried to present heroin use as dangerous, however the presentation failed to give a strong message. There was almost an understanding of the main character's heroin use because Dillon had lost his wife. It was a presentation designed to hook audiences and promote empathy. Dillon never ran out of money or sympathetic friends, further underplaying the dangers of heroin. There was no meaningful discussion about why he began to use heroin to deal with his grief. Since previous research has revealed that drug abuse among teenagers increases when their peers use drugs, drug use by a peer character could be interpreted as a way to cope with problems, especially for at-risk students.

Another program that missed the opportunity to educate was *The Jerry Springer Show*, one of the most popular programs

at Foothill. This show provided an avenue for many subjects that might otherwise not be discussed on television. However, there was no meaningful discussion. Guests would hit, throw chairs, and curse one another. Nobody listened to anyone else, and there was a lack of respect for feelings and opinions. Members of the audience urged the guests to fight. At the end of every show, Jerry Springer offered his insights, however, the spectacle of a fight was the main attraction for the audience.

Although the findings failed to support hypothesis 1, students at Footill still may have had a double dose of cultivation. The programs in this study were not representative of the total television exposure for these students. Conceivably, the study programs may have been too specific. Perhaps this is why larger studies look at television programming over longer periods of time. More students at Foothill than at Wilcox reported violence in their neighborhoods and accepted the use of drugs and alcohol. Therefore, the students at Foothill may have been at greater risk of being influenced by these programs than the students at Wilcox because they were already at risk for gang activity, teenage parenthood, and substance abuse.

Television may also have influenced cultivation process among the students at Wilcox because they had less opportunity to discuss sex, drug and alcohol abuse, and gang membership within their school curriculum. Wilcox students

had less opportunity than Foothill students to hold in-school discussions about sex because their curriculum was more structured. However, Foothill students had the opportunity to discuss birth control, disease, and promiscuity within the curriculum at their school. There were also workshops about peer pressure at Foothill, not available in the conventional curriculum at Wilcox.

Television was more influential in the construction of reality for the students at Foothill than for the students at Wilcox. Almost half of the students at Foothill said that television reflected real life. Perhaps this belief could have contributed to their perception of reality. It is also possible that television may have influenced students' perceptions concerning appropriate behaviors. Since television characters almost never suffered consequences from their delinquent behavior, Foothill students could have received validation for their own delinquent behavior through them. Mainstreaming occurred through television because television was the dominant source of information at Foothill.

Wilcox students could also have received validation for delinquent behavior through television. However, this validation was probably offset by a more stable environment. Wilcox students were less inclined than Foothill students to believe that television reflected reality. Since television

was also the main source of information at Wilcox, there was a mainstreaming effect about acceptable behavior.

Findings with respect to gender differences were the same at both schools. Male students were more inclined to watch the most violent programs. Female students were more inclined to watch programs with the most drug and alcohol content and the most sexual content. Since teenagers are particularly susceptible to television's messages, these programs could affect the cultivation of gender roles.

Unlike previous research, this study found no relationship between the amount of television watched and perceived violence in the environment. At both schools, the students who watched the most television were no more likely than others to perceive violence in their neighborhood. Perhaps other environmental factors such as family problems, friends, or the type of programming watched, contributed more to a heightened sense of fear and anxiety than the amount of time spent watching television.

The television programs in this study did not show a relationship between exposure and cultivation for students at Foothill and Wilcox. However, the students at both schools almost certainly receive validation through television exposure because of its omnipresent quality. Foothill students were exposed to many risk factors--drug and alcohol abuse, gang violence, lack of resources, parental neglect, and teenage parenthood. When combined with these risk

factors, television may become an important socializer. Although environmental factors also contribute greatly to their perceptions, at-risk students are more likely to than other students emulate behaviors portrayed on television--especially behaviors that validate their own reality.

Directions for Future Research

This study differed from previous research in that it examined television programs that teenagers specifically watched, rather than sampling general prime-time or cable programming. This study could open the doors to much larger studies comparing more than two high schools and over a longer period of time. Perhaps, such studies would reveal that television actually does give a double dose of reality to at-risk students. Larger studies could also help to determine the relative influence of television and the environment on the socialization of teenagers.

Future studies might perhaps break down degrees of sexual content, violence, and substance abuse in a way that was not possible with this study. Future studies could also profile the traits of main characters to help determine why they may appeal to at-risk students.

This type of research could also be used to examine the socialization through television of other specific groups. For example, the cultivating effects of television on teenage girls at risk, and on their perception of beauty could be studied, by examining the programs they watch. Another study

could examine how television reinforces societal expectations that boys not show emotion. Future studies could also examine how video games or music influence at-risk youth.

Finally future research could also expand upon the research methods used in this study. Perhaps more qualitative information could be gathered by holding student interviews as well as surveys.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Questionnaire - Foothill High School

- 1) Are you   49__ male   53__ female
- 2) Year in school   0__ Frosh   11__ Soph   35__ Junior   55__ Senior
- 3) How many hours of TV do you watch per week?
      1__ 0   52__ 1-10   21__ 11-15   9__ 15-20   16__ more than 20
- 4) Name your favorite TV program.   Second choice?   Third choice?
      1) The Simpsons   2) Jerry Springer   3) Southpark
- 5) I admire the characters in my favorite TV programs.
      15__ Strongly agree   34__ Agree   30__ Somewhat Agree   22__ Disagree
- 6) More often than not, TV reflects real life.
      10__ Strongly agree   31__ Agree   41__ Somewhat Agree   18__ Disagree
- 7) How often do you watch your favorite TV programs?
      42__ Never miss   38__ 3 times a mon   10__ 2 times a mon   10__ once a mon
- 8) I watch TV with my friends.
      2__ Always   17__ Often   65__ Sometimes   18__ Never
- 9) I watch TV with my family.
      11__ Always   34__ Often   43__ Sometimes   14__ Never
- 10) I watch TV on school nights.
      45__ Always   24__ Often   29__ Sometimes   4__ Never
- 11) I watch TV on weekends.
      29__ Always   27__ Often   35__ Sometimes   11__ Never
- 12) I get most of my news and information from:
      31__ Parents   35__ School   32__ Friends   59__ TV
- 13) I get information about sex mostly from TV.
      6__ Strongly agree   7__ Agree   39__ Somewhat Agree   49__ Disagree
- 14) I get information about sex mostly from my parents.
      5__ Strongly agree   9__ Agree   35__ Somewhat Agree   51__ Disagree
- 15) I get information about sex mostly from my friends.
      12__ Strongly agree   23__ Agree   39__ Somewhat Agree   27__ Disagree
- 16) I have a TV in my room.   70__ yes   31__ no
- 17) I watch TV to/for:
      34__ relax   79__ entertainment   8__ background noise   16__ info
- 18) I learn more from TV than I learn at school.
      2__ Strongly agree   10__ Agree   39__ Somewhat Agree   51__ Disagree
- 19) TV teaches me things about sex that my parents don't.
      9__ Strongly agree   11__ Agree   24__ Somewhat Agree   57__ Disagree

Appendix A (continued)

Questionnaire - Foothill High School

- 20) If I could be any TV character, I would be:
Character: Bart Simpson Show: The Simpsons
- 21) On TV, violence is like it is in real life.
8__Strongly agree 27__Agree 46__Somewhat Agree 19__Disagree
- 22) There is too much violence on TV.
11__Strongly agree 22__Agree 29__Somewhat Agree 40__Disagree
- 23) There is too much sex on TV.
10__Strongly agree 13__Agree 33__Somewhat Agree 45__Disagree
- 24) Sex on TV is like real life.
9__Strongly agree 15__Agree 33__Somewhat Agree 42__Disagree
- 25) I can't wait until I'm 21, so I can legally drink.
28__Strongly agree 9__Agree 26__Somewhat Agree 36__Disagree
- 26) I have seen violence in my neighborhood.
23__Strongly agree 41__Agree 21__Somewhat Agree 15__Disagree
- 27) Drinking helps me loosen up and be more outgoing.
11__Strongly agree 15__Agree 23__Somewhat Agree 52__Disagree
- 28) Fighting or using a weapon is ok if I'm defending myself.
17__Strongly agree 16__Agree 43__Somewhat Agree 25__Disagree
- 29) Drugs are ok as long as it doesn't get out of control.
14__Strongly agree 10__Agree 27__Somewhat Agree 50__Disagree
- 30) Drinking is ok as long as it doesn't get out of control.
15__Strongly agree 18__Agree 35__Somewhat Agree 33__Disagree
- 31) The crime rate is higher now than ten years ago.
41__Strongly agree 27__Agree 20__Somewhat Agree 11__Disagree
- 32) The police are there to help in my neighborhood.
7__Strongly agree 27__Agree 32__Somewhat Agree 35__Disagree

Appendix B

Questionnaire - Wilcox High School

- 1) Are you   50__ male   50__ female
- 2) Year in school 16__ Frosh 39__ Soph 28__ Junior 17__ Senior
- 3) How many hours of TV do you watch per week?
1__ 0   42__ 1-10 28__ 11-15 8__ 15-20 19__ more than 20
- 4) Name your favorite TV program.   Second choice?   Third choice?
1) Dawson's Creek   2) The Simpsons   3) Felicity
- 5) I admire the characters in my favorite TV programs.
11__ Strongly agree   39__ Agree   39__ Somewhat Agree   0__ Disagree
- 6) More often than not, TV reflects real life.
7__ Strongly agree   20__ Agree   63__ Somewhat Agree   8__ Disagree
- 7) How often do you watch your favorite TV programs?
45__ Never miss   43__ 3 times a month   7__ 2 times a month   2__ once a month
- 8) I watch TV with my friends.
1__ Always   13__ Often   69__ Sometimes   17__ Never
- 9) I watch TV with my family.
11__ Always   26__ Often   48__ Sometimes   15__ Never
- 10) I watch TV on school nights.
42__ Always   24__ Often   27__ Sometimes   6__ Never
- 11) I watch TV on weekends.
40__ Always   24__ Often   34__ Sometimes   1__ Never
- 12) I get most of my news and information from:
19__ Parents   23__ School   28__ Friends   56__ TV
- 13) I get information about sex mostly from TV.
4__ Strongly agree   18__ Agree   44__ Somewhat Agree   33__ Disagree
- 14) I get information about sex mostly from my parents.
4__ Strongly agree   13__ Agree   27__ Somewhat Agree   54__ Disagree
- 15) I get information about sex mostly from my friends.
8__ Strongly agree   21__ Agree   43__ Somewhat Agree   27__ Disagree
- 16) I have a TV in my room.   65__ yes   33__ no
- 17) I watch TV to/for:
29__ relax   84__ entertainment   10__ background noise   15__ information
- 18) I learn more from TV than I learn at school.
1__ Strongly agree   6__ Agree   38__ Somewhat Agree   54__ Disagree
- 19) TV teaches me things about sex that my parents don't.
6__ Strongly agree   20__ Agree   35__ Somewhat Agree   37__ Disagree

Appendix B (continued)

Questionnaire - Wilcox High School

- 20) If I could be any TV character, I would be:

Character: Joey

Show: Dawson's Creek

- 21) On TV, violence is like it is in real life.
 7__Strongly agree   10__Agree   63__Somewhat Agree   18__Disagree
- 22) There is too much violence on TV.
 5__Strongly agree   24__Agree   42__Somewhat Agree   29__Disagree
- 23) There is too much sex on TV.
 5__Strongly agree   19__Agree   35__Somewhat Agree   40__Disagree
- 24) Sex on TV is like real life.
 4__Strongly agree   11__Agree   42__Somewhat Agree   40__Disagree
- 25) I can't wait until I'm 21, so I can legally drink.
 12__Strongly agree   2__Agree   35__Somewhat Agree   45__Disagree
- 26) I have seen violence in my neighborhood.
 8__Strongly agree   17__Agree   30__Somewhat Agree   44__Disagree
- 27) Drinking helps me loosen up and be more outgoing.
 2__Strongly agree   8__Agree   16__Somewhat Agree   73__Disagree
- 28) Fighting or using a weapon is ok if I'm defending myself.
 13__Strongly agree   30__Agree   42__Somewhat Agree   13__Disagree
- 29) Drugs are ok as long as it doesn't get out of control.
 4__Strongly agree   5__Agree   20__Somewhat Agree   70__Disagree
- 30) Drinking is ok as long as it doesn't get out of control.
 5__Strongly agree   23__Agree   30__Somewhat Agree   42__Disagree
- 31) The crime rate is higher now than ten years ago.
 29__Strongly agree   35__Agree   25__Somewhat Agree   9__Disagree
- 32) The police are there to help in my neighborhood.
 13__Strongly agree   28__Agree   47__Somewhat Agree   12__Disagree

Appendix C

Coding Sheets

Code Sheet for Sexual Content

Program and Date	1) kissing	2) embracing	3) innuendo	4) provocative dress	5) seduce/flirt behavior	6) responsible discussion	7) intercourse	8) main char. aggressor	9) main char. submissive

Explanations:

1) Kissing	5) seductive/flirtatious behavior
2) Embracing a non-family member	6) any discussion about contraception, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases
3) Verbal innuendo	7) intercourse
4) Provocative dress including short skirts, cleavage, bathing suits, or skimpy clothing	8) main character as aggressor
	9) main character as submissive

Code Sheet for Violent Content

Program and Date	1) Using a weapon to kill/hurt	2) threaten bodily harm	3) Rape	4) natural acts	5) main char committing acts	6) main char as victims	7) gratuitous violence	8) humorous violence	9) cartoon violence

Explanations:

1) using a weapon (fist or anything else) to hurt or kill	6) main characters as victims
2) threatening bodily harm	7) gratuitous violence (no purpose other than shock value)
3) rape (any forcible sex)	8) humorous violence (Three Stooges, Stooges)
4) natural acts (people killed/hurt by earthquakes, etc.)	9) cartoon violence
5) main characters committing violent acts	

Appendix C (continued)

Coding Sheets

Code Sheet for Drugs and Alcohol Content

Program and Date	1) gratuitous use	2)cocaine-heroin-meth	3) Marijuana	4) Alcohol	5)Prescript Drugs	6) Address Problems	7) main char taking	8) main char pushing

Explanations:

1) any substance used without consequences	5) prescription drug use
2) hard drugs such as cocaine, heroin, or meth	6) addressing problems such as addictions, overdoses, alcoholism
3) marijuana use	7) main character taking drugs or alcohol
4) alcohol use	8) main character pushing drugs or alcohol

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FROM: Serena W. Stanford *Serena W. Stanford*
AVP, Graduate Studies & Research

DATE: September 3, 1998

The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has approved
your request to use human subjects in the study entitled:

"Television's Role in the Socialization and
Cultivation of At-Risk Youths"

This approval is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the anonymity of the subjects' identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to any and all data that may be collected from the subjects. The Board's approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Serena Stanford, Ph.D., immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma and release of potentially damaging personal information.

Please also be advised that all subjects need to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject's participation, refusal to participate, or withdrawal will not affect any services the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted.

If you have any questions, please contact me at
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