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## EXAMINING THE ASSUMPTIONS IN RESEARCH ON CHILDREN AND MEDIA

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In a landmark article, Gonzales (1988) argued that communication has its roots in interdisciplinarity and the interdisciplinary nature of communication is one of its main strengths. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of children and media. Typically, a sound piece of scholarship that examines children and media looks not only at the child, but at the child as a developmentally influenced and constrained individual. Many scholars (e.g., Byrne et al., 2009; Cantor, 2002; Krcmar, 2010) take developmental theory as a starting point. Research on children and media has worked consistently and intentionally to apply work from developmental psychology. However, surprisingly little has been written that examines this interplay between developmental psychology and media research or the theoretical and methodological assumptions that hold sway in this area of study. In fact, it is perhaps evidence of the strength of these assumptions that they have not been considered or examined at length. In this chapter I examine these assumptions and discuss how environment influences child development and how methodological issues influence our understanding of both child development and of the interplay between media and child development.

### **Implicit Assumptions in Research on Children and Media**

In any area of research, the assumptions that we hold most strongly are the most difficult to see. In research on children and media, many of the assumptions derive from those rooted in developmental psychology itself. Although these assumptions are not necessarily incorrect, they bear re-examination to help us move forward in our research enterprise.

### ***Children and Adolescents Are Qualitatively Different from Adults***

One of the most straightforward assumptions that guides work in developmental psychology is that children are qualitatively different from adults. Before this idea made it into scientific consciousness, children were not focused on as a separate class of persons. More recently, however, there have been political and economic reasons to assume that children lack important knowledge and ability that require them to have a (female) caretaker for a lengthy period (Burman, 2008). This results in a freeing of jobs for an adult, male work force. These social and political forces shape the definition of childhood (Burman, 2008), generating

assumptions about it: namely that childhood exists, and that these assumptions are meaningful and useful.

This assumption that children are unique is inherent in the work of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (Harris, 1997). Piaget popularized the idea that young children think, conceptualize, and understand differently from adults and therefore their perceptions of the world and their interactions in it all deserve distinct attention (Piaget, 1926). Much of the research that focuses on young children and mass media takes as a premise that children do think differently from adults; however, this assumption has been questioned, if not directly then at least in its effect. Specifically, we assume that if young children think differently, and are constrained by cognitive limitations (e.g., Inhelder & Piaget, 1964) then they are in need of adult protection. Educational media and prosocial television targeting young children assume that children are in need of guidance and shaping. A contrasting view is that children are increasingly sophisticated as they encounter newer technologies and a greater variety of media content (Livingstone, 2018). While some scholars have taken this approach, arguing that children should be empowered as sophisticated media consumers (e.g., Livingstone, 2018) the dominant approach in media effects research, has been a more protectionist approach (Buckingham, 2000). After all, recent research suggests that children need not comprehend content in order to be affected by it (Cingel & Krčmar, 2019). Thus, it does suggest that some protection is warranted.

If, as Piaget has argued, young children's thinking has certain characteristics that are somewhat resistant to environmental training, simply empowering them with information is not enough. For example, Cantor and colleagues (e.g., Cantor, 2002) have argued that to calm preschoolers' fear, simply explaining that television is not real does little to calm their fears due to these very cognitive limitations. Instead, until children have made a certain amount of cognitive developmental progress that allows them to distinguish between reality and fantasy, it may be more productive to calm their fears with behavioral strategies such as hugs (Cantor, 2002).

Assumptions regarding young children's difference from adults are also implicit in the literature on adolescence. However, the fact that adolescents exist as a distinct age group is also an assumption worth examining. Although puberty as a physical change has obviously always been with us, adolescence as a concomitant social and emotional period is somewhat new. At the beginning of the twentieth century, children often began paid employment at age 10. A minimum age for leaving school (15 years) was not introduced in Europe until 1944 (Harris & Butterworth, 2002). However, as technological advancements required more skilled workers and more specialized education, the years of schooling needed to maintain a technologically advanced society increased. Requirements for advanced schooling necessitated postponement of reproduction. Thus, biological changes came face to face with economic, political, and social necessity and the years of adolescence were ultimately extended. Amidst these forces, an academic interest in a period of life known as adolescence became greater (Saltman, 2005).

The middle of the twentieth century, then, saw a meeting of several occurrences. First, adolescence as a social construction, influenced by the dominant political, economic, and mores of the day emerged (Saltman, 2005). Next, television quickly became the mass medium of the decade, with approximately 65 percent of homes owning a set by 1955 (Paik, 2001, p. 15). Third, the field of mass communication was in its infancy and interest in media and children was among the early topics of interest (e.g., Schramm et al., 1961). Thus, it was inevitable that an interest in the effects of television on adolescents would emerge.

Certainly this is not to argue that adolescence is not a time of physical, emotional, and psychological change. Rather, it is important to examine our assumption that adolescence as a period of development exists somehow outside of the social and cultural contexts that helped

define it. In sum, one major assumption is that children and adolescents think in ways that differ from adults. It is crucial to understand that this is an assumption in order to recognize when developmental theory provides us with shoulders to stand on, or when the weight of the extant theory clouds our vision.

### ***Age Is Taken as a Primary Variable***

A second major assumption, is that age is often utilized as a key variable in studying children. To perhaps state the obvious, this practice is less common in media research that examines adults' responses to media. Thus, we assume that not only do children think differently from adults but that the way they process media differs as they age. Furthermore, with only some exceptions, we assume that audience processing strategies and outcomes change with age during childhood and adolescence, but do not do so during adulthood. Whereas it is true that processing changes with the age of the child, it is crucial, still, to view this as an assumption. A sizable body of literature does support this contention from the very youngest viewers (e.g., 6-month-olds, Krcmar et al., 2007) to adolescents (Borzekowski & Strasburger, 2008). However, despite compelling evidence that age is an important variable in research, age is often used as a proxy for development without recognition that age is confounded by experience. As children age, they develop biologically, and their experience with media typically increases; their interactions with the world outside of their immediate families expand; they may be exposed to greater and more varied stimuli. Thus, age is an indicator of development, but it is also a corollary of many experiential variables. Thus, it is important to question and empirically examine the assumption that age differences are inevitably linked to individual development and recognize when it is a confound, hiding other relevant factors.

### ***All Differences Are Related to Development***

A third assumption, is that we tend to look for changes in children over time and then take any differences as evidence for development or progress towards adulthood. Unlike the assumption above, where age may mask more important or interesting variables, research on child development must be vigilant about not assuming that any change is evidence of development. Consider, for example, research on adults and media. Differences between older and younger adults, when they are examined, are taken as evidence for social differences, economic differences, or differences in the subculture of a cohort. None of this is to imply that development does not occur; however, it is important to consider when changes over time or differences between age groups are related to something other than cognitive, emotional, or social development.

For example, more than three and a half decades ago, researchers suggested that due to cognitive limitations, very young children, those aged 3 to 5, did not understand the persuasive and selling intent of advertising (Ward et al., 1977). By today's standards, when toddlers and preschoolers are exposed to arguably more advertising on more media platforms than ever before, it is possible to construe this classic research as dated. It is possible that with access to more media and more sophisticated advertising campaigns, young children have become more aware and critical of advertising. If such is the case, then scholars (e.g., Livingstone, 2018) are correct: we underestimate and are unduly protective of children. Research from 1977 (i.e., Ward et al., 1977) should be replicated because the content of the media under investigation – advertising – has changed dramatically in the ensuing years. In fact, McAlister and Cornwell (2009) set out to test this claim. They found that 3- to 5-year-olds still do not understand the

persuasive intent of advertising, despite the more sophisticated media climate in which they have been raised. However, 35 years of research provided support for this finding; one study did not. However, even since 2009, things have changed. Unlike a decade ago, when children started with a large screen, many children well under 2 years of age start with a cell phone and are exposed to ever more screen media. Is it possible that this increased exposure to screen media, across platforms, not only correlates with age but is independently causal of changes in outcomes? Additional research that considers these cohort changes is needed to continue to track the independent and interdependent roles of child development and increased screen time.

### ***Selective Application of Developmental Phenomena and Developmental Theory in Understanding Children and Media***

Researchers tend to focus on children's cognitive processing, assuming that other developmental factors (e.g., emotional, moral development) are outcome variables. Perhaps this is related to scholars' focus on a narrow group of developmental scholars and theorists (e.g., Piaget). For example, Vygotsky (1978, 1986) is often overshadowed by his contemporary, Piaget. However, Vygotsky's work is valuable to media researchers due to several insights. Vygotsky stressed that certain cognitive processes in children (e.g., voluntary memory, problem-solving, self-regulation) have their origins in social interaction and activity. To researchers interested in studying how children learn from a diverse array of media, theorists who emphasize the dynamic nature of development may help in our understanding of the process. Thus, Vygotsky offers a possible starting place for thinking about children's learning from new media, especially, from social media. As a result of this somewhat narrow focus, work by Piaget on cognitive development has often been used exclusively. This creates a subtle assumption: cognitive development tends to be used in order to understand how children process and understand media; children's emotional, moral, and social development is often measured as a dependent variable.

Despite this assumption, recent theorists paint a more holistic, integrated picture of children that media researchers would be wise to attend to. For example, past developmental literature has assumed that children are passive recipients of development, with development emerging either innately or from their social world that either provided or did not provide them with what they needed (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). More recent approaches see children as active participants in their own development, due to a drive to explore and understand their world. Furthermore, it is not necessarily accurate to atomize the developmental process, assuming that cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development are distinct processes. Instead, cognitive development may inform moral development which in turn may influence children's interactions with peers.

In terms of media research, we must recognize, for example, that cognitive development influences children's attention to media, but emotional development may influence their attraction to a media character which in turn may affect their attention. Similarly, social development may influence their willingness and ability to "talk" to an on-screen character which may then influence their learning from that character. Thus, if we continue to assume that (1) media are processed primarily cognitively and (2) media influence primarily emotional, social, and learning outcomes, we may become stagnant in our research. Therefore, that we are somewhat selective and limited in our application of developmental theory should act as a call to expand the boundaries of theories we apply in order to understand how children understand and are influenced by media, socially, emotionally, cognitively, and morally.

### ***The Importance of Environment***

A sizable amount of research regarding children and media does not consider the family as a featured variable. This decision is sometimes made for the sake of expediency and sometimes for reasons of internal validity. In either case, family and environment is left out. Although the elimination of certain variables is an inherent property of experimental design this may not always be appropriate.

There are reasons both practical and theoretical to claim that it is invalid to remove children from a social environment in the name of experimental validity. First, children rarely consume media in isolation; very young children are rarely completely alone. Furthermore, many children's programs attempt to engage children socially by asking questions, eliciting verbal and physical interaction, and building social relationships between the main character and the child (Lauricella et al., 2011). Thus, for young children, social interaction is part of the experience of consuming and learning from media.

Second (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), children's development cannot be considered isolated from social interaction. Specifically, "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (1978, p. 88). In the end, then, the social world and learning are so intertwined that to attempt to take them apart would be difficult and meaningless. To atomize something that occurs in the family (i.e., television viewing), especially when studying children who cannot survive outside of the context of a support system, is to destroy it beyond recognition.

Another problem with the way family environment has been studied is that social interaction is likely a broader concept than we conceptualize it in, say, the mediation literature. Strasburger et al. (2009) define mediation simply as "the ways in which parents try to buffer children's exposure to media content" (p. 506). However, even this broad definition misses some of what we need to look at in understanding how families interact with media. Yes, parents mediate in explicit ways (e.g., by helping children interpret content) but they also engage in ways that remain mostly unexplored. Is there a difference in a child's processing of media between sitting in a high chair or being rocked and kissed by a parent while viewing? Is one condition more supportive of learning or more distracting to it? Certainly an experiment could attempt to answer that question, but perhaps we consider it too irrelevant or strange to ask. In any case, family environment, social interaction, and mediation may be conceptualized in ways that must be broadened.

The criticisms withstanding, the study of children and media and the application of development to media has offered some very practical insights. For example, *Sesame Street* was the first children's program to be designed based on research that indicated what worked in terms of children's learning from television (Fisch & Bernstein, 2001; Lesser & Schneider, 2001). Thus, research on children and media has offered information, recommendations, and assistance to those who design it (e.g., Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017).

### ***The Influence of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Assumptions in Child and Media Research***

It is self-evident that the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 had massive and worldwide effects on so many aspects of life that they will not be enumerated here. Instead, I state simply that family, work-life balance, and the role of media in that equation have not even begun to be unpacked. When schools and childcare establishments were suddenly shuttered, millions of parents worldwide, especially those with younger children and with paid employment were forced to deal with the colliding realities of an insufficient safety net for working parents, a

school system that was not equipped to deal with online education in most cases, and the increasingly real (rather than assumed) inability of children, especially younger children, to learn in that online environment that had not been designed for that purpose (Engzell, Frey, & Verhagen, 2021, Götz & Lemish, 2022).

In the past decade, the age at which children are exposed to media has dropped (Bohnert & Gracia, 2021) and although overall traditional screen time has not increased as much, the use of mobile media more than doubled for every age group from 0–8 years (Rideout & Robb, 2020). However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, children used screens for school, entertainment, and to communicate with family and friends at increased rates. Even apart from time spent with screen for school, the proportion of children and teens who spent more than four hours a day on screens essentially doubled in every category for children 0–4 years (from 13% prior to Covid-19 to 26% during Covid-19) to older teens 14–17 years (from 32% to 62%) (Statista, 2020). How did all of this additional screen time, almost all done in the home with family members present, test and affect our assumptions?

First, we saw in stark reality, if not yet in actual statistical effect sizes, that children are qualitatively different from adults; they do lack ability and knowledge that makes them require a lengthy period of care (although the actual length of that time varies dramatically from culture to culture; Konner, 2010); and women were more likely than men to bear the burden of that increased care and education (Power, 2020) during Covid-19. Furthermore, extensive research is necessary to understand how children learn best in an online environment and how those research findings can be applied. Thus, although the assumption under consideration points to the fact that children are in fact in need of a specialized environment, it remains unclear how best to design that media environment.

A second assumption that was amplified and tested by the Covid-19 pandemic, when many children spent essentially all of their time at home and with family, was the role of family interaction in navigating, moderating, and mediating the effects of media. Past research has typically either ignored family variables in the search for the effects of media on children, or examined family interaction as a key variable (e.g., Coyne, et al., 2017; Jiow, et al., 2017), with the former being the more common approach. The importance of the family-media dynamic, the importance of media as means of educating children, and the importance of media as sometimes-vital babysitters for exhausted parents was highlighted. Therefore, the assumption that one could ignore family interaction variables in a study on media and children is still possible methodologically, but it is likely unwise to do so when examining the year of Covid-19. After all, it may not be an exaggeration to say that family and media were the only things children had in some cases.

The effects of Covid-19 on families, on children, and on the role of and importance of media in the lives of children remains to be tested. Will the pandemic year and the increased media it introduced into children's lives have a long-term impact? Will the landscape of media, children, and families be permanently altered by this pandemic year? How will the assumptions listed above be further questioned and tested? These questions beg research on children and media for the coming decade.

SEE ALSO Chapter 8 by Berriman in this volume.

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