



**VIOLENCE IN THE HOME AND ON THE SPORTS  
FIELD: CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF  
TELEVISION VIOLENCE**

Marian Tulloch  
School of Social Sciences and Liberal Studies  
Charles Sturt University - Mitchell

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# **Violence in the home and on the sports field: Children's perceptions of television violence**

Marian Tulloch  
School of Social Sciences and Liberal Studies  
Charles Sturt University - Mitchell  
BATHURST 2795

"What is called violence and what is not is no trivial matter. The extent to which a behavior is perceived as violence has a great deal to do with what people are willing to do about it (Smith, 1983, p. 44). While violent assaults in our streets and public places or by intruders in our homes occasion great public concern, there are two types of assault which traditionally have not been seen as the concern of law enforcement authorities. Police and legal authorities have in the past been notoriously reluctant to intervene in domestic disputes and even less likely to become involved in violence among sports players. Domestic violence and violence on the sporting field despite many differences, were seen as domains where different rules apply. This paper examines young people's responses to televised portrayals of these two forms of violence in an attempt to understand their definitions of violence and how they perceive aggression in these domains.

In both the domestic and sporting domain a number of arguments have traditionally been used to rationalise non intervention. Assaults are trivialised as not real crimes and as such a diversion from the task of law enforcement (Smith, 1983). A blind eye is frequently turned to aggression that is seen as part of the norm for certain subgroups, where domestic "disturbances" and sporting "scuffles" are so widespread that singling out individuals would seem unfair. In addition in both areas the defence of a "continuing relationship" is used; society is reluctant to further strain continuing relationships by legal intervention (Smith, 1983). Intervening between parties to a social contract can be seen to threaten the valued social institutions of the family or organised sport. Assault within an ongoing relationship, it is often claimed, is best sorted out by the participants. Such a view of domestic violence ignores the reality of power imbalance in many marriages and de facto relationships. Implicit in the ongoing relationship argument is the belief that women are free agents who can simply leave a relationship that is unacceptable to them. Women, however, may feel unable to leave because of economic or social pressures or, most compellingly, fear of the violent consequences of leaving (Matka, 1991). Yet, although attitudes to domestic violence are changing, as recently as 1988 a New South Wales survey revealed that a third of respondents felt that domestic violence should be kept private (Public Policy Research Centre, 1988). Horrow (1980) in a survey of professional athletes found that they believed disputes should be settled privately and personally on the field of play and not go "outside the family". The analogy with the domestic sphere is used to support a domain free of state involvement.

Issues of violence in both these domains are linked inextricably with notions of masculinity. Violence in both the domestic and sporting sphere is primarily male violence. Aggression on the sporting field is frequently equated with toughness and masculinity and thus viewed as character building, with its social gains outweighing any undesirable consequences. In the domestic sphere a patriarchal belief in male dominance, the tradition of a man's rights over his partner, and a perception of male violence as a natural response to frustration and stress can underpin an excusing or trivialising of domestic violence. The naturalness of violence as a response to frustration is also common in sporting commentaries. The use of terms such as "domestic disputes" or "aggressive play" hide the seriousness of physical and psychological damage that can occur. Characteristic of both domestic and sporting violence therefore is a view of the home and the sports arena as subject to different rules of conduct and sanctions from other kinds of social interaction.

In recent years there has been much questioning of traditional attitudes to these privileged domains. As dramatic acts of extreme violence such as the series multiple killings in Melbourne and NSW have focussed public concern about violence, Duncan Chappell discussing the findings of the National Committee on Violence argued that "the way we deal with disputes in the home, the way we accept it in the sporting arena" cannot be isolated from our overall societal response to the problem of violence (Warneminde, 1991, pp.22-23). Altering attitudes and responses to domestic violence has become part of a national agenda, with particular focus on encouraging reporting and changing police responses on notification of domestic violence. Education about domestic violence has been recommended within the school curriculum (Report of NSW Domestic Violence Committee, 1991). Schools also have the potential to influence attitudes to violence in sport by the ethos they develop around competitive sport.

Television has a potentially valuable role to play in raising issues and stimulating debate. While television's effect in promoting aggression in children has been much debated, the potential educative role of television in relation to violence has been less examined. Popular television not only displays violence but debates it. The present paper looks at school students' perceptions of two such programs about violence in the home and on the sports field. The view that violence in these domains should be beyond the law is challenged in a soap opera narrative on domestic violence and in a studio discussion about violence in sport. The study seeks to establish whether school students see such assaults as violence and how this perception relates to other dimensions of program evaluation such as realism, interest and personal disturbance (Gunter, 1985). The ABT report on violence on television concluded that "the discrimination of real versus fictional events had a demonstrable influence on reactions to violent material (ABT, 1990: p 215)". Given this claim it is important to assess the impact of fictional material such as soap opera. Is the impact of the theme limited by the fictional nature of the violence? Conversely can redefining violence in sport in socio-conventional terms alter the response to real violence making assaults on the sports field a ritualised conflict more like drama.

In discussing responses to televised material differences in the age, gender and social background of subjects needs to be taken into account. Collins (1983) has shown how younger children comprehend narratives better if the social context portrayed is closer to their own experience. The moral values that viewers bring to a program will also change with age. Younger children perceive morality in absolute terms defined by rules laid down by authority (Kohlberg, 1963, Piaget, 1965). At the pre-conventional stage of moral development a person's view of right and wrong are closely linked to what they see as rewarded and punished by authorities. Children may accept domestic violence perpetrated by an authority figure especially if it is seen to go unpunished. As individuals' moral reasoning develops through adolescence, they move into a stage of conventional reasoning that initially focuses on pleasing others and subsequently on a recognition of the role of rules in the maintenance of the social order. At this level domestic violence may be rejected as not good because it is not a "nice" way to behave or in the context of social campaigns against domestic violence is perceived as not socially approved. Support for state intervention would depend on the person's understanding of the place of the family in the social order.

Reasoning about violence in sport may similarly depend in younger children on their perception of what behaviour is labelled good or bad. As adolescents develop an understanding of the role of law in maintaining social order, they also come to distinguish between what are issues of morality and what of social convention. Sport is organised according to sets of rules and Bredemeier (1983) argues, within the sporting domain the intrinsically moral issue of aggression is frequently reclassified as a matter of social convention. It is easy, within this framework, in which participants are viewed as objects organised into a social system, for issues of moral behaviour to be reduced to the conventions of a particular sport.

Gender differences in moral reasoning may also affect judgements about violence. Gilligan (1982) has argued that female moral development proceeds towards a morality of nonviolence and that females find aggressive competition a threat to social connectedness. As male development is focused on justice issues they can see rule-bound competition as setting clear boundaries and limits to aggression. Such a distinction implies that while females, who elevate non violence to an overarching principle, will see violence of itself as unacceptable, males are more likely to interpret sporting aggression within certain defined limits as a social conventional issue. Particularly for those with roles within the sporting system, as player, commentator or fan, definitions of appropriate behaviour relate to the expectations governing those roles rather than some generalised value system. Apologists for domestic violence also tend to employ this role-related discourse, which focuses not on male and female rights and obligations but on gender-specific role expectations. From such a perspective violence is relabelled and redefined and is therefore not an issue of public concern. This study examines whether gender differences occur in perceptions of domestic and sporting violence and in the assessment of characters or participants on television who represent differing roles within these social systems.

Social class differences in attitudes to violence have been argued to underlie identified class differences in domestic and sport related violence. Dunning (1983) has argued that males from segmentally-bonded working class communities are characterised by a stress on toughness and fighting ability, a high tolerance of violence with pleasure taken in violent sports, and an aggressive masculinity which shows itself in physical violence to rival male groups but also to women. Protection from domestic violence orders are more frequently sought in New South Wales by victims of lower socioeconomic status. While reporting may not be an adequate reflection of incidence, these class differences have been used as evidence for a 'subculture of violence' (Matka, 1991). Given this debate, it is valuable to see whether working and middle class pupils vary in their attitudes to violence in the home and on the sports field.

Student responses to portrayals of violence are seen then as a function both of the televised text and of the understandings, attitudes and values they bring to the program. Viewers' cognitive frameworks affect the meanings they derive from television, but television also aids in the formation of these meanings (Livingstone, 1990). The responses analysed here arise from a situation in which students are presented with televised material which they are asked to reflect on and evaluate in ways that may shape as well as mirror their responses.

## **METHOD**

### Subjects

The study involved 441 subjects, 239 males and 202 females from Years 4, 7 and 10 in Sydney state high schools. About equal numbers in each age group, with half drawn from a predominantly middle class and half from a predominantly working class area, watched one excerpt. The excerpts were approximately 20 minutes long and were taken either from a story about domestic violence or a debate on violence in sport.

### Excerpts

1) Domestic Violence. The narrative was taken from the soap opera, *A Country Practice*. A wife, Karen, is assaulted on frequent occasions by her husband, Barry. Karen is reluctant despite the advice of medical staff and police to press charges. However, when their son who is distressed by the violence runs away from home, she phones the police.

2) Sport. The excerpt shows a series of violent sporting incidents including both aggression that is within the rules of the game and illegal violence. The excerpt then presents part of a current affairs discussion on violence in sport. The section focuses on two speakers, an academic, who argues for legal sanctions on sports violence, and a well known sports commentator, who believes in self regulation by sporting bodies.

### Procedure

Students were shown an excerpt in classroom groups and were asked to write a short account of what they had seen. They then completed semantic differential five-point scales on the domestic violence narrative or the clips of sports violence. The marked form of the adjectival pairs used were: interesting, funny, exciting, disturbing, violent, and either realistic (domestic violence) or typical (sport). A set of five-point adjectival pairs were also presented for the characters (husband and wife) or discussants (academic and commentator). The adjectives used were, in their marked form: good, intelligent, pleasant, fair, efficient, reasonable, normal, strong, violent and, in the domestic violence story, aggressor.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A comparison of program measures for the whole sample indicated that the domestic drama was seen, using a .01 level of significance, as more interesting (ACP=3.76, Sport=3.21), more violent and less funny than the sports excerpts. The fictional drama was seen as realistic (4.0) and more violent (4.28) than real violence on the sporting field (3.77). It was also seen as significantly more disturbing (3.45) than the sports violence(2.71).

While differences between program ratings give an indication of overall reactions, to understand how student responses differed by age, class and gender it is necessary to examine whether and on what dimensions of program ratings, group differences emerge. A composite age, class and gender variable was found to discriminate on a set of dimensions of the sports violence clips. Younger, female and working class students were more inclined to see the excerpts as violent, unexciting, not funny and somewhat disturbing. Table 1 contrasts the extreme groups, with Year 4 working class girls being quite disturbed by the

perceived violence, while Year 10 middle class boys dismissed the same incidents as not violent, somewhat funny and exciting and certainly not disturbing.

**Table 1** *Correlations with discriminant functions separating viewing groups and means of the most extreme groups on rating of program excerpts*

<b><u>Sporting violence clips</u></b>			
	Y4WC girls	Y10MC boys	
Violence	(.70)	4.44	2.61
Not funny	(.51)	3.88	2.32
Disturbing	(.48)	3.87	1.75
Not exciting	(.42)	4.00	2.64

  

<b><u>Domestic violence</u></b>			
	Y10WC girls	Y10MC boys	
Violence	(.73)	4.81	3.50
Interesting	(.68)	4.13	2.82
Realistic	(.39)	4.81	3.50
Disturbing	(.33)	4.44	3.00

Differences in response to the domestic violence drama were most evident at the Year 10 level with working class girls being the most involved, finding the program very realistic and violent, interesting and disturbing. The Year 10 middle class boys, while neutral in their interest level, also saw it as somewhat violent and realistic and while giving a neutral rating on disturbance clearly found it more disturbing than the sports excerpts. A rather different evaluative pattern emerged for the two programs. Those disturbed by the sports violence rated it neither funny nor exciting. Respondents most disturbed by the domestic violence were those most interested and involved with the program.

Having considered reactions to the program excerpts, it is important to see how students responded to the carriers of messages about violence. Two issues were explored. What was the overall evaluation of these figures and were there very different views held by the varying age, class and gender groups? As Table 2 indicates there were dramatically different assessments of the husband and wife. He was seen in an extremely negative light, while she was rated highly positively.

**Table 2** Mean ratings for whole sample of husband and wife on semantic differential rating scales

	Husband	Wife
Good/bad	1.31	4.47
Pleasant/unpleasant	1.42	4.31
Fair/unfair	1.35	4.11
Normal/unusual	1.90	4.20
Intelligent/stupid	1.57	3.88
Efficient/inefficient	2.28	3.63
Weak/strong	2.58	4.10
Victim/aggressor	1.61	4.50
Non violent/violent	1.45	4.55
Reasonable/emotional	1.98	2.68

A combination of gender, class and age found group differences on only a few adjectives; the overall black and white view of the two characters was shared by all groupings. There was no evidence that any group excused the aggressor or blamed the victim. Younger male working class students were more polarised than older female middle class students on the intelligent/stupid and reasonable/emotional dimensions but less polarised on the victim/aggressor and efficiency dimensions. A closer look at the means suggests that the wife was seen as less intelligent by the older girls (3.42), Year 4 working class boys(4.81), and more emotional (1.92) compared to (3.1). Some written accounts showed bewilderment at the wife's inaction "I don't understand why the wife wasn't strong enough to do something about it before". The lower polarisation on the victim/ aggressor scale was due to a lower aggressor rating of the husband by the Year 4 working class boys (2.48) than the older middle class girls (1.5) and a tendency to see the wife as less efficient (3.38) than the girls (4.25). This last difference suggests less acceptance by the older middle class girls of the husband's criticisms of his wife as a poor homemaker.

When evaluations of the two participants in the discussion of sports violence were examined, a very different picture emerged. While there was overall a more positive evaluation of the sports commentator than the academic, marked differences emerged in group responses. Significant differences between groups were found on a combination of the variables fair, good, pleasant, strong and intelligent. As shown in Table 3, while Year 7 working class girls, favoured the academic particularly on the dimensions of fairness and pleasantness the most strongly contrasting group, Year 10 middle class boys, strongly favoured the commentator over the academic. These boys rated the academic somewhat negatively but also as non-violent (4.18). Thus, while for the abusive husband, Barry, violence was seen as part of a negative constellation of attributes, in the context of sport an advocate of non-violence was seen in negative terms by those who enjoy the excitement of conflict.

**Table 3** *Semantic differential ratings of academic and sporting commentator for the most divergent groups on the five adjectival pairs most highly correlated with discriminant function separating groups*

	Y7 WC Girls		Y10MC boys	
	Commentator	Academic	Commentator	Academic
Fair	2.82	3.36	4.21	2.61
Good	3.00	2.92	4.07	2.50
Strong	3.13	2.95	3.79	2.43
Intelligent	2.83	2.91	3.82	2.39
Pleasant	2.43	3.14	3.86	2.29

Written responses to the sports violence showed a sharp change from the younger boys who echoed adult concerns about the harmful effects of violence in sport to the older boys who felt violence made sport more exciting.

Thus while a Year 4 boy wrote "I like sport but would like it more if it didn't have much violence", a Year 10 boy typified his peers reaction "I must admit a good punch up is good to see when the games are a bit boring". Some reacted angrily to attacks on sport abusing its critics as "wimps" and "do gooders" and echoing a line from the sports commentator "if they don't like the violence they can turn it off". Perhaps the sharpest contrast to the dismissive responses to the sports violence was that of a middle class Year 10 male viewer of the domestic violence drama, "I thought it was very degrading, humiliating and embarrassing in a way that made you feel ashamed". None of the written responses trivialised or applauded violence in this context.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study aimed to examine school students' perceptions of domestic and sports violence and the extent to which judgements about the violence and the key message carriers in each excerpt were evidence for a view of home and sports field as special domains. Responses to the domestic violence narrative, indicated a clear labelling of the behaviour as violent and an overwhelming rejection of the perpetrator by all age, class and gender groupings. While the older male, middle class students were least interested in the program, there was no evidence of a greater tolerance of violence or a blaming of the victim. There was an overall perception of the excerpt as realistic, violent and somewhat disturbing. Even fictional violence can appear a threat when occurring in the home, which should be a place of security for young people. Students, particularly older girls, extracted from the program messages about what to do if confronted with domestic violence. The need to seek outside intervention was frequently mentioned and there was no suggestion, as with some adult viewers, that the police would not respond supportively.

In contrast to the relative unanimity about domestic violence, the sports violence produced very different responses from the various groupings. Younger children took the violent incidents seriously, while older particularly male students were more inclined to see them as non-violent, even funny. Moreover, some referred to sports violence in terms of toughness. The sports commentator who argued against outside intervention was seen as strong, the

academic who criticised sporting violence as weak. These findings suggest a rejection by older sports fans of the views of those seen as outsiders to the sporting domain.

The results of this study have important implications for understanding how young people react to portrayals of violence on television and for attempts to influence their attitudes to violence. A simple view that the reality and severity of the violence is what affects viewers' reactions was not supported. Students watching these excerpts were well aware of the fictional nature of the domestic violence and the reality of the sporting clips. It was also the case that the severity of the violence, in purely physical terms, was greater in several of the sports incidents where jaws were broken and heads kicked, whereas the meaning of violence in those two contexts is different.

Responses to the sports violence debate suggest that concerns about violence expressed by perceived outsiders tend to be rejected by those who take a socioconventional view of sporting aggression. Sports violence was not seen as a serious issue by most of the adolescent males, and a shift in social attitudes will be needed before sport is no longer perceived as a special domain with different rules about violence. Responses to the domestic violence excerpt suggests that here the shift is already occurring. The seriousness with which the students responded to the dramatisation of domestic violence suggests the potential value of such material in an educative campaign. It could serve as a valuable basis for provoking discussion about the problem of domestic violence in a context detached from the immediacy of the issues for some students.

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