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ABUSED CHILDREN AND TELEVISION: EXAMINING PARASOCIAL INTERACTION IN SPECIAL POPULATIONS

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ABSTRACT

ABUSED CHILDREN AND TELEVISION: EXAMINING PARASOCIAL INTERACTION IN SPECIAL POPULATIONS

By

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The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the difference between abused and non-abused children's relationships with television characters. Abused and non-abused children between the ages of 7 and 16 years old were interviewed about their favorite television character. Analyses were conducted to investigate parasocial interactions and how they differ by abuse status (abused vs. non-abused) and gender (boys vs. girls). Findings suggested that abused children parasocially interact with their favorite TV characters less often than non-abused children. Girls were more likely to identify social behavior as an important character attribute in their favorite character, while boys were likely to report strength. Conversation topics during these parasocial interactions typically were about episode information for non-abused girls. Abused girls reported seeking and giving help as the reason why they engaged in these relationships, while non-abused girls described affective reasons.

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INTRODUCTION

Children are our future. When children are growing up, they look to other people to help them develop their personality, style, and other defining features. Since they are developing a sense of self, not only do children imitate their parents, teachers, and friends (Weiner & Elkind, 1972, p. 83), but they also have the television and other media as sources of possible imitation. The television offers a plethora of interesting people to be like. Even though real-life models are important to children's development, "many of the adults witnessed by children come from prime-time television programs they come to prefer and frequently view" (Fernie, 1981, p. 47). It is not that unexpected that children would prefer these models to real-life people. Such characters are often physically attractive, engaging, and the ideal prototypes of success. Thus, it becomes important to ask what impact television characters have on children's socialization?

Several studies have attempted to answer this very question. Most of the research has focused on those characters that foster young viewers' identification. Typically, identification has been defined as the process of "the viewer, in fantasy, [putting] himself in the place of a character and momentarily [feeling] that what is happening to that character is happening to himself" (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957, p. 76). In fact, identification has been found to mediate the impact of television violence on aggression as well as thin body ideals on eating disorders in adolescents (Harrison, 1997; Huesmann, Lagerspectz, & Eron, 1984). Thus, identification with media personae may be an

important intervening variable between television exposure and other behaviors (Reeves & Miller, 1978).

Scholars interested in the process of identification have examined primarily gender differences. Studies have generally shown that boys and girls are more likely to identify with male characters on television (Eisenstock, 1984; Hoffner, 1996; Lonial & Auken, 1985; Miller & Reeves, 1976; Reeves & Miller, 1978). These findings have been explained by the fact that TV continues to feature a disproportionate amount of men when compared to women (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1994, p. 31). Thus, male characters seem to be potent role models among both young males and females.

Although children are identifying frequently with males on television, research reveals that young boys and girls are drawn to different attributes of media characters. Studies show boys typically identify with characters that are active and physically strong whereas girls are drawn to physically attractive characters (Miller & Reeves, 1976; Reeves & Greenberg, 1977; Reeves & Lometti, 1979; Reeves & Miller, 1978). In addition, some studies have cited that children identify with characters based on intelligence and humor (Reeves & Greenberg, 1977; Reeves & Lometti, 1979; Reeves & Miller, 1978). As such, character traits seem to be important predictors of the likelihood of children's identification.

Another body of research indicates that people not only identify with characters on television, but also have cognitive or affective relationships like parasocial interactions. Parasocial interactions are imaginary relationships that viewers form with media characters. Originally, the idea of parasocial interactions was developed by Horton and Wohl (1956) who were interested in viewers' relationships with television

news anchors. The researchers argued that newscasters can create an illusion of intimacy because the audience members perceive the message as directed towards them (Horton & Wohl, 1956). When audience members start to anticipate these illusionary conversations, they have been noted to talk back to their television screens (Noble, 1975) or feel as if they know these characters as well as their friends and neighbors (Hoffner, 1996).

Most of the research on parasocial interaction has used adults as subjects. One series of studies evaluated adult's interactions with television newscasters (Choi, 1993; Cortez, 1991; Perse, 1990; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Houlberg (1984) interviewed respondents over the telephone and found that over half of the participants reported having parasocial relationships with news anchors. Levy (1979) also assessed whether adults engage in parasocial relationships with people in the news. He found that a majority of adults in his sample reported having such interactions. Further, parasocial interaction was positively correlated with exposure to TV news. That is, as individuals' exposure to television news increased so did the frequency of their parasocial interactions. Or, the reverse process is equally plausible; individuals who parasocially interact with news anchors may be more likely to seek out and watch television news programming.

In addition to newscasters, research reveals that other characters on television can also create a sense of intimacy with the audience. One such media personality is the television- shopping host. Grant, Guthrie, and Ball-Rokeach (1991) examined the relationship between exposure to television shopping networks and parasocial interactions with emcees. Their results revealed that heavy viewers of television shopping programming were more likely to develop parasocial relationships with the

hosts. Such findings are presumably due to the fact that shopping hosts, much like TV news anchors, talk directly and explicitly to audience viewers thereby heightening an illusion of intimacy.

Soap opera stars have also been examined in relation to parasocial interaction (Perse & Rubin, 1988; Yanof, 1991). It has been argued that female college students often schedule their classes around soap operas and this persistence in viewing may be an important precursor for parasocial relationships (Lemish, 1985, p. 281). Indeed, results from several studies (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Turner, 1993) suggest that adults do parasocially interact with soap opera characters, especially when the viewers perceive soap operas as real.

Although most of the research on parasocial relationships has focused on adults, children may be another subgroup prone to such illusionary interactions. To date, however, only one published study in the U.S. has actually looked at children's parasocial interactions with television characters. Hoffner (1996) interviewed a sample of 7- to 12-year olds about their parasocial relationships with their favorite television characters. She was not only interested in the frequency of such illusionary relationships but also the attributes of characters that predict parasocial activity. Similar to the results on identification with television characters above, the study revealed that parasocial interaction with a male television character was predicted by physical attractiveness and intelligence for both boys and girls and by strength for boys only. Females' parasocial interaction with female characters was predicted solely by physical attractiveness. In addition, parasocial interaction was more common with characters that were regarded as kinder, more helpful, more caring, less mean, and less selfish.

Even though children have parasocial interactions, they may not affect all children in the same way. As Wilson and Smith (1998) noted, children's reactions to the television "are mediated to some degree by certain characteristics they bring to the viewing environment" (p. 551). An example of an individual difference variable that may affect television's impact is intelligence. Sprafkin, Gadow, and Abelman (1992) discussed how gifted children are less apt to perceive television content as real when compared to children of normal intelligence. Conversely, Van Evra (1998) stated that children who have learning, behavioral, and emotional disorders usually view more television, interpret the content as realistic, and are in turn more vulnerable to television's influences (p. 130). Perhaps, disadvantage is another variable that can affect the way children interpret television. For example, Sprafkin, Gadow, and Dussault (1986) found that emotionally disturbed children perceived television as real even when the study controlled for intelligence (cited in Van Evra, 1998, p. 125).

One group of young viewers that may fit into this category of disadvantage is abused children. Maltreated children are not only emotionally disturbed, but are more likely to be disadvantaged in other ways. Niolon (1999) reported several ways in which abused children are underprivileged. They are more likely to come from a low socio-economic status (SES) family, a single-parent home, have witnessed a parent being abused, had fewer friends during their childhood, had parents who were dissatisfied with their marriage, and have received little affection from their father.

Since abused children may differ in their interpretation of television reality, the prevalence and intensity of parasocial interactions may also manifest differently for this special population. Theory and research supports this idea in three different ways. The

first reason is based on an attachment explanation. Cole and Leets (1999) have theorized that people who have insecure attachments may be more likely to satisfy their relational needs in different outlets, like parasocial activity (p. 497). Consistent with their thinking, Cole and Leets (1999) found, when compared to secures and avoidants, anxious-ambivalent adults were more likely to form parasocial relationships with their favorite television characters. Since abused children tend to be classified with an attachment pattern known as insecure-disorganized attachment, otherwise known as anxious-ambivalent attachment (Carlson, Cicchetti, Barnett, & Braunwald, 1989), they may be more likely to have parasocial interactions with their favorite television characters than non-abused children.

The second reason is based on a depression explanation. Research reveals that depression and parasocial activity are related. At least one study with adults showed that when depression is not temporary in nature it is positively correlated with parasocial interaction (Vogel, 1993, p. 65). Several scholars have discussed the rate of depression among maltreated children. For example, Toth, Manly, and Cicchetti (1992) compared physically abused children to neglected and non-maltreated children on depression rates. The results indicated that children in the abuse sample had significantly higher depression scores than children who were physically neglected and the control group (Toth, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1992, p. 105). Similarly, an interview survey by Flisher et al. (1997) found that 24% of a sample of children with a history of physical abuse were candidates for a mood disorder, which included major depression (p. 128). Because they are more likely to be depressed, abused children should be more likely to engage in parasocial relationships than non-abused children.

The third reason is based on a functional alternative explanation. Studies with adults have found that parasocial relationships may substitute or replace something else to satisfy a specific need. For example, Levy (1979) found that individuals who were lacking in social interaction had an increased chance of developing a parasocial interaction with a television newscaster. Similar results were obtained by Yanof (1991). Not surprisingly, several scholars have noted the difficulty abused children have with social relationships. Feldman et al. (1995) found that abused children received lower adaptive functioning ratings by their teachers than a control group (p. 324). Additionally, Salzinger, Feldman, Hammer, and Rosario (1993) established that abused children were preferred less as social companions by their fellow peers than non-abused subjects (p. 175). This difficulty abused children have in forming relationships seems like a reasonable explanation for why they may be more likely to have parasocial interactions than non-abused children (Heineman, 1998).

In summary, the research undoubtedly has established that adults and children do have parasocial interactions with characters on television (Choi, 1993; Cortez, 1991; Grant, Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991; Hoffner, 1996; Houlberg, 1984; Levy, 1979; Perse, 1990; Perse & Rubin, 1988; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Turner, 1993; Yanof, 1991). Research indicates that these parasocial relationships are more likely to occur in populations that are clinically depressed, use television as a functional alternative, and have an anxious-ambivalent attachment style (Cole & Leets, 1999; Levy, 1979; Vogel, 1993; Yanof, 1991). Literature on abuse suggests that maltreated children are more likely than non-maltreated children to exhibit all of these characteristics (Heineman, 1988; Wolfe, 1999). Therefore,

it is likely that abused children will engage in parasocial interactions more often than their non-abused counterparts.

Present Study, Hypotheses, and Research Questions

To test this prediction, the present study replicated and extended Hoffner's (1996) investigation. Abused and non-abused children between the ages of 7 and 16 years old were interviewed about their relationships with media characters, as well as their motivations for such relationships. Based on the literature review above, it is anticipated that differences in the prevalence of parasocial interactions would be observed in maltreated and non-maltreated subjects. In specific, Hypothesis 1 states:

H1: Abused children will report parasocially interacting with their favorite characters on television more often than non-abused children.

In addition to prevalence, the present study is interested in attributes of characters that influence parasocial interactions among abused and non-abused children. Hoffner (1996) developed a scale that measured what character attributes attract the child to interact with a particular character. To date, research has only investigated non-abused children; therefore, the following question is asked:

RQ1: What character attributes attract abused and non-abused children to their favorite television character?

Lastly, this study is not only interested in what characters children are drawn to when they participate in a parasocial interaction, but what needs these relationships are filling for children. Past research has only presented results on the prevalence of children's parasocial relationships and the attributes that attract them to media personas. In other words, what are the reasons children state for engaging in parasocial interactions. To date, no published studies have investigated the reasons why children have these imaginary relationships with television characters. Therefore, this examination calls for the following question:

RQ2: What motivates abused and non-abused children to have parasocial relationships?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 60 children ($M = 9.75$, $SD = 2.07$, range = 7 - 16) were sampled for this investigation, 30 abused and 30 non-abused. There were 25 males and 35 females, with the majority of the sample between the ages of 7 and 12. Of the total sample, 38% of the children were White, 33% were Black, 8% were Hispanic, 5% were Asian, 2% were American Indian, and 13% labeled themselves as other. All children were from low SES families. Each child was required to receive permission from their parent or guardian and their own assent prior to participation.

The goal of this study was to obtain a sample of abused children identified by trained professionals, rather than trying to identify them through scales that correlate with abuse. Given the obstacles involved in finding an abused sample of children to participate in research, it seemed appropriate to allow a non-random sample. Therefore, a convienence sample of abused children participated through a Human Service Agency in a Midwestern city. Non-abused children were obtained through an elementary school in the same city[1].

Procedure

The interview covered six groups of questions: parasocial activity, prevalence of parasocial interactions, character attributes, motivations for viewing, affect, and demographics. Non-abused children and abused children received the same questionnaire. Following Hoffner's (1996) protocol, most of the non-abused children

were interviewed individually in a quiet room at the children's school. A researcher was trained on how to administer the questionnaire[2]. Each question was read aloud and the child was instructed to respond orally or by pointing to their chosen response from a larger printed version of the scales. Older children, in the non-abused sample, completed the questionnaire through a group interview; this was necessary to keep interview time to a minimum.

Abused children were all interviewed individually by a volunteer or employee of the Human Service Agency. These individuals were also trained by the university researchers on how to administer the questionnaire. Again, as done with the non-abused sample, each question was read aloud and the child was instructed to respond orally or by pointing to their chosen response from a larger printed version of the scales.

After answering all of the survey questions, each child was debriefed about the contents of the questionnaire. The survey administrators explained that the questions tried to determine what TV characters children like, why they like them, and how different types of children respond to different characters on television. Two forms of the survey were constructed by randomly ordering the parasocial interaction and character attributes scales; this helped to minimize order effects.

Measures

In order to answer the questions on the survey each child went through a carefully constructed series of questions to determine their favorite television character. Children started by indicating how often they view television, their three favorite television shows, their three favorite television characters and the show in which they appear, and then finally answered the question, *"Who is your favorite TV character?"* The children were

then instructed to refer to that favorite television character when they answered survey questions.

Parasocial interaction. Children's illusionary interactions with their favorite television characters was measured with the 10-item Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI) adapted by Hoffner (1996), originally developed by Rubin and Perse (1987). Reliability was reported at a Cronbach's α of .70 (Hoffner, 1996). Because of this marginally acceptable alpha level, additional questions were added to the PSI scale. Examples of new items include, *"If something happens to [insert name of favorite character] I feel bad"* and *"If [insert name of favorite character] lived in my neighborhood we would be friends."* In addition, one item was modified because the content was confusing, *"I see [insert name of favorite character] as a natural, down-to-earth person"*, was changed to *"[insert name of favorite character] seems like he/she would be easy to talk to."* Lastly, *"I find [insert name of favorite character] to be attractive"* was removed from the scale because an overlapping item occurred in the character attribute scale.

Research also confirms that the 10-item scale and longer versions of the scale are internally valid. Discriminability, a form of construct validation, was determined because first, the scale is correlated to related constructs. For example, Rubin and Perse (1987) found that the PSI scale was correlated to voyeurism and escapist relaxation. Perse and Rubin (1987) also found that the scale was uncorrelated to unrelated constructs, like passing the time and co-viewing distraction. In addition, the scale has shown evidence of convergence because similar results have been obtained from a number of studies that have utilized the scales (Auter, 1992). Responses to the items were answered on an ordinal 5-point Likert scale, from *"disagree a lot"* to *"agree a lot"* Higher scores on the

scale indicate a greater parasocial interaction with the character. These items were summed and averaged to form a single parasocial interaction scale ($M = 3.91$, $SD = .72$, range = 1.71 - 5). Confirmatory factor analysis of these items suggested a unidimensional scale with a standardized item $\alpha = .79$[3] (Hunter & Gerbing, 1982) (see Appendix A for complete scale).

Prevalence. In addition to the PSI scale, other questions were used to determine the prevalence of these interactions between children and their favorite television characters. First, a direct yes or no question was asked to determine whether the subjects ever participated in these interactions, *"Do you have times you think about [insert name of favorite character] and talk back and forth with him/her in your head?"* In addition, a four item scale was constructed with several items like, *"How often do you talk back and forth with [insert name of favorite character] in your head?"* Response options were on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *"never"* to *"all of the time"* ($M = 2.02$, $SD = .85$, range = .5 - 3.75, $\alpha = .81$).

Character traits. Each subject also completed a character attribute scale developed by Hoffner (1996). Sixteen ordinal items were used to measure children's perceptions of their favorite character's personal traits. This study looked at the same categories: attractiveness, strength, humor, intelligence, and social behavior. The children were asked to agree or disagree with each item on a 5-point Likert scale, pertaining to their favorite character on television.

Hoffner (1996) conducted a principal axis factor analysis on her scale. Each of the items received moderate to high levels of reliability in the study. Cronbach's alpha for each trait were as follows, social behavior (*kind, helpful, caring, mean, violent*, and

selfish) $\alpha = .90$, attractiveness (*handsome/pretty, good-looking,* and *somewhat ugly*) $\alpha = .89$, humor (*funny*, and *says and does funny things*) $\alpha = .81$, strength (*physically strong*, and *has more strength than most people*) $\alpha = .79$, intelligence (*smart, good at figuring things out,* and *dumb*) $\alpha = .87$. The scale also showed face validity because of the questions asked. For example, to measure if the child perceives their favorite character to be strong the question read, *"[insert name of favorite character] is physically strong."* For this investigation, reliability estimates were adequate for the subscales; social behavior ($M = 4.05$, $SD = .88$, range = 2- 5, $\alpha = .75$), attractiveness ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.42$, range = 1 – 5, $\alpha = .82$)[4], humor ($M = 4.5$, $SD = .98$, range = 1 – 5, $\alpha = .76$), strength ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.41$, range = 1 – 5, $\alpha = .79$), and intelligence ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.20$, range = 1 – 5, $\alpha = .68$) (see Appendix B for complete scale).

Motivation. Two open-ended questions were asked in the interview to explore what motivates children to engage in these relationships. Open-ended items were, *"What do you usually talk about?"*, and *"Why do you talk back and forth with [insert name of favorite character] in your head?"*

Affect. These questions assessed how happy children felt when engaging in parasocial interactions. Closed-ended items were, *"How sad/happy do you feel when you talk back and forth with [insert name of favorite character] in your head?"* Response options were on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *"Not at all Sad/Happy"* to *"Very Very Sad/Happy"*. For the sad items ($M = 1.5$, $SD = 1$, range = 1 – 5). For the happy items ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.67$, range = 1 -5).

Demographics. Lastly, demographic information for each subject was collected, including gender, age, race, and the parent's occupation. Since abused children may not

live with their parents, the abused sample questionnaire did not include questions regarding the children's parental occupations. Information from the Human Service Agency confirmed that the children were primarily from low SES households.

RESULTS

Data Analyses

For all interval-level data, unweighted-means analyses of variance were conducted with abuse status (no, yes) and gender (boys, girls) as factors. For all categorical level data, multidimensional contingency tables were formed using the same two factors. Log-linear analyses were executed on the frequencies of responses for such data. This statistical procedure provides a parallel to the traditional AVOVA for nominal level data (Marascuilo & Levin, 1983). Below, only means or percentages with no letter in common in their subscripts are significantly different at the $p < .05$ level. Results are presented below by each hypothesis and/or research question and not in the order the measures were asked on the questionnaire.

Parasocial Interaction

Hypothesis 1 predicted that abused children would parasocially interact with their favorite television characters more often than non-abused children. This hypothesis was tested in 3 different ways. First, children answered questions from the parasocial interaction scale. Participants indicated their agreement with statements such as, *"[insert name of favorite character] makes me feel comfortable, like I'm with a friend."* Responses ranged from, (1) *disagree a lot* to (5) *agree a lot*. An analysis of variance on the children's summed parasocial interaction scale scores was calculated. No significant differences emerged by abuse status or gender. Exactly half of the children (50%) in the sample reported parasocially interacting with their favorite television character[5].

Second, children were asked the following yes or no question: *"Do you have times that you think about [insert name of favorite character] and talk back and forth with him/her in your head?"* A log-linear analysis of yes/no responses revealed a significant effect for abuse status, G^2 ($N = 58$) = 9.80, $p < .01$, V* = .12. Contrary to expectation, a higher proportion of non-abused children reported parasocially interacting with their favorite television character ($72\%_b$) than did abused children ($31\%_a$).

Third, a series of scaled questions were summed to estimate the prevalence or frequency of these intrapersonal relationships. To illustrate one question, the children were asked, *"In a typical day, like today, how frequently do you imagine talking with your favorite character?"* Responses options ranged from (1) *never* to (4) *all of the time.* The three remaining questions were similarly worded and featured the same response options. An analysis of variance on the summed prevalence items revealed a significant main effect for abuse status, F (1, 47) = 3.91, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Again, non-abused children were significantly more likely to report parasocially interacting with their favorite television character ($M = 2.24_b$) than were abused children ($M = 1.72_a$). No other significant effects emerged here. Overall, the results are directly opposite to the prediction offered in Hypothesis 1.

Character Attributes

Research question 1 inquired about what character attributes attract abused and non-abused children to their favorite television characters. As described above, several character attributes were assessed. For each attribute, the response options ranged from (1) *disagree a lot* to (5) *agree a lot.* The first was social behavior. As you may recall, the children were asked questions about how *mean*, *violent*, *selfish*, *kind*, *helpful*, and

caring they saw their favorite character. An analysis of variance of these ratings revealed a significant main effect for gender, $F(1, 55) = 5.70, p < .05, \eta^2 = .09$. Girls were significantly more likely to perceive their favorite character as having socially acceptable behavior ($M = 4.28_b$) than were boys ($M = 3.74_a$). No other main effects or interactions were significant.

The second character attribute measured was attractiveness. The children were asked how *handsome/pretty* and *good-looking* they found their favorite character. An analysis of variance was performed on these ratings; no significant effects emerged in this analysis. Over a third (38%) of the sample saw their favorite character as attractive.

The third attribute analyzed was humor. Children indicated how *funny* their character is and whether their favorite character *says and does funny things.* An analysis of variance revealed no significant differences. More than three quarters of the sample (86%) found their character to be humorous.

The fourth character attribute assessed was strength. The participants answered questions that asked if they agreed that their favorite character was *physically strong* and *has more strength than most people.* An analysis of variance revealed a significant main effect for gender, $F(1, 55) = 5.35, p < .05, \eta^2 = .08$. For these results, boys were more likely to see their favorite character as strong ($M = 3.60_b$) than were girls ($M = 2.78_a$). There were no other significant main effects or interactions for strength detected.

The fifth attribute analyzed was intelligence. Children indicated if they thought their favorite television character was *smart*, and *good at figuring things out.* No significant effects emerged for this factor. Over half of the sample (66%) saw their favorite character as intelligent.

Motivation

Research question 2 inquired about abused and non-abused children's motivations for engaging in parasocial relationships. Two open-ended questions were asked to address this research question. First, the interviewer asked *"Do you have times that you think about [insert name of favorite character] and talk back and forth with him/her in your head?"* If the child answered yes, the interviewer then inquired, *"What do you usually talk about?"* This question aimed to elicit conversational topics that the children recalled engaging in with their favorite television character. Responses to this question were coded by indicating the presence or absence in the child's response of liking the character (i.e., *"like watching her show"*, *"funny stuff"*), episode information (i.e., *"we talk about the show"*, *"what else will he show on TV"*), interaction with the character (i.e., *"stupid stuff—how the day went"*, *"strength and sports"*), and other television shows (i.e., *"cartoons"*, *"TV shows"*). Coding categories for these and all other open-ended responses were developed from the responses given by the children. Several coding categories were collapsed to represent the children's responses on a more global level. The actual coding procedure was then performed by two independent judges and disagreements were resolved through discussion with the primary researcher. Using Scott's π (1955), intercoder reliability was 97% for character liking, 96% for episode information, 90% for interaction with the character, and 100% for other television shows.

Log-linear analyses were executed on each of the conversational topics. First, liking the character was examined and no significant differences emerged for this variable. Overall, about a third (30%) of the sample indicated liking the character as a conversation topic.

Next, a log-linear analysis of episode information revealed a significant effect for gender, G^2 (N = 30) = 3.90, p < .05, V* = .09. Girls were significantly more likely to talk about episode information (42%$_b$) than were boys (9%$_a$)[6]. No other effects for episode information were significant.

Interaction with the character was also examined as a possible topic of conversation. No significant effects emerged from these analyses. Just under half (47%) of the sample indicated interaction as a topic of conversation.

Lastly, the conversation topic of other TV shows was analyzed. A log-linear analysis did reveal a significant effect for gender, G^2 (N = 30) = 4.08, p < .05, V* = .10. Boys were significantly more likely to talk about other television shows (18%$_b$) than were girls (0%$_a$). This analysis should be interpreted with caution because a total of two boys reported this answer. No other significant effects emerged in this analysis.

The second open-ended question asked, *"Why do you talk back and forth with [insert name of favorite character] in your head?"* Responses to this question were coded by indicating the presence or absence of positive affect (i.e., *"cause I like talking to her"*, *"because sometimes he is really really funny"*) and help (i.e., *"to help him"*, *"get over anger"*). Intercoder reliability was perfect for both categories at 100%.

A log-linear analysis of these frequencies revealed a significant interaction effect for positive affect, G^2 (N = 35) = 5.82, p = .01, V* = .12. Non-abused girls expressed positive affect as a reason for their parasocial interactions more often (75%$_b$) than did abused girls (17%$_a$). A main effect was detected also for gender, G^2 (N = 35) = 4.02, p < .05, V* = .08. Qualified by the interaction effect, girls were more likely to talk with their favorite character for affective reasons (59%$_b$) than were boys (23%$_a$).

A log-linear analysis of the help category also revealed a significant interaction effect, G^2 ($N = 35$) = 7.48, $p < .01$, V* = .15. In this analysis, abused girls saw help as a reason for interacting with their favorite character more often ($50\%_b$) than did non-abused girls ($0\%_a$). No other effects emerged in this analysis.

Affect

The interviewer asked two closed-ended items to assess the enjoyment children received from engaging in these interactions. The interviewer first asked, *"How sad do you feel when you talk back and forth with [insert name of favorite character] in your head?"* Responses ranged from (1) *not at all sad* to (5) *very very sad.* An analysis of variance of these ratings revealed no significant effects. About a quarter (27%) of the sample reported being at least a little bit sad when interacting with their favorite character.

The interviewer then asked, *"How happy do you feel when you talk back and forth with [insert name of favorite character] in your head?"* Responses ranged from (1) *not at all happy* to (5) *very very happy.* An analysis of variance of these ratings also revealed no significant findings. Approximately three quarters (79%) of the sample indicated at least feeling a little bit happy when interacting with their favorite character.

Correlations Among Measures

Final analyses were conducted by computing partial correlations for all variables used in the study controlling for gender and abuse status (see Table 4). First, the PSI scale was positively correlated with social behavior ($r = .39, p < .01$), attractiveness ($r = .42, p < .01$), and intelligence ($r = .56, p < .01$). Prevalence, on the other hand, was correlated with the other two attributes, humor ($r = -.31, p < .05$) and strength ($r = .28, p$

$< .05$). These partial correlations suggest that children are in fact interested in characters with these specific attributes, except humor which resulted in a negative correlation. Second, affect was negatively correlated with help ($r = -.38, p < .05$). This finding proposes that children either find these relationships fun or taxing. Third, prevalence was positively correlated with happiness ($r = .65, p < .01$). This result suggests that most individuals who engage in these relationships find them to be fun.

DISCUSSION

Generally, the findings from this study reveal that abused children parasocially interact with their favorite television characters differently than non-abused children. Unexpectedly, abused children were found to engage in these relationships *less* than their non-abused counterparts. Although the first hypothesis was unsupported, convergent findings with Hoffner (1996) and other identification literature were obtained in the analyses of character attributes. The most notable consistency was that boys are interested in strong characters. This investigation also attempted to take a first look at the motivations behind children's parasocial interactions. At least for girls, these analyses revealed positive affect and help as the most important reasons for engaging in parasocial relationships.

In terms of specific predictions, it was expected in Hypothesis 1 that abused children would parasocially interact with their favorite television character more often than non-abused children. There was no support for this hypothesis. In fact, the opposite pattern emerged where non-abused children were engaging in these relationships more often; however, these findings are hard to ignore given the convergent results on two analyses. Approximately three quarters of the non-abused sample reported participating in these illusionary interactions with their favorite character, compared to only a third of the abused sample.

Why do abused children report participating in parasocial interactions less often than non-abused children? There are at least four possible explanations for this finding.

First, Salzinger et al. (1993) explains that abused children tend to be more aggressive, show fewer leadership skills, and less cooperation when playing with other children. Typically, these offensive social acts are responded to negatively by other children and the abused child is rejected by their peers (Salzinger et al., 1993). This rejection may caution abused children from engaging in any type of friendship, be it imaginary as in a parasocial context or a real relationship.

Second, because abused children are isolated from social situations by their parents, they are less likely to develop appropriate social schemas for interacting with other children (Coleman, Butcher, & Carson, 1980; DiMaggio, 1997; White & Watt, 1973; Wolfe, 1999). Therefore, when they are presented with a social situation, they may alienate themselves from creating friendships because they don't know how to develop them. This alienation may include any type of friendship, including parasocial companions.

A third possibility is that abused children may fear punishment from their parents if they engage in friendships. Since abused children are typically isolated from social relationships, they may think that if they engage in friendships their parents will punish them (Wolfe, 1999). A parasocial relationship may seem like a safe alternative to the observer, but the child may not be cognitively aware of that distinction. Their interpretation of any friendship may be associated with fear; therefore, the child may avoid any type of social relationship including parasocial interactions.

Finally, the abused sample may have included extreme cases of abuse because the sample was obtained from programs that are designed to care for maltreated children. Considering the three reasons stated above, this population may have been more likely to

avoid the possibility of rejection in an illusionary friendship than less severely abused children. To this end, a Tukey *a* post hoc analysis was conducted to see what trends emerged when looking at high SES, low SES, and abused children. The PSI scale revealed no significant differences between the means of these three groups, but the trend did suggest that high SES children ($M = 3.67$) interact in these relationships less often than low SES ($M = 3.89$) and abused children ($M = 3.93$). The alternative PSI measurement used in this study which summed four prevalence questions again revealed different findings compared to the PSI scale. This analysis suggested that high SES ($M = 1.71$) and abused children ($M = 1.72$) interact with television characters at about the same level and low SES children ($M = 2.24$) are significantly more likely to engage in these relationships than the other two groups.

Since the abused sample was in the care of organizations designed to help the children, this group may consume similar levels of television to the high SES group and therefore have similar prevalence ratings because of the amount of exposure. Although this is a viable hypothesis, mean comparisons showed a trend of abused children ($M = 3.85$) as the highest consumers of television compared to low income ($M = 3.15$) and high income ($M = 2.42$) children in the study[7]. Although the explanation offered here is a possibility, it seems that the results are again inconsistent with each other and call for future research to confirm a specific pattern.

Overall, it seems that previous research and the current findings indicate that abused children are unlike non-abused children when it comes to parasocial interactions. Other investigations like Hoffner (1996) have found that children do engage in these relationships. This examination confirms the same findings; 75% of the non-abused

sample reported engaging in these interactions. Considering this information, it seems that abused children are again showing that they have incurred negative effects from the maltreatment of their parents because they avoid these parasocial relationships. Future research should investigate this same question with a larger sample to see if similar findings are revealed.

The first research question was interested in what types of character attributes attract abused and non-abused children to their favorite TV characters. This research question found two significant gender effects. First, boys were more likely to see their favorite character as strong. This finding is consistent with previous research in identification and parasocial interaction. Typically, children are attracted to male characters and specifically boys like characters that are physically strong (Eisenstock, 1984; Hoffner, 1996; Lonial & Auken, 1985; Miller & Reeves, 1976; Reeves & Greenberg, 1977; Reeves & Lometti, 1979; Reeves & Miller, 1978). Boys most likely select these types of characters because men in American society are expected to be strong individuals emotionally and physically (Gray, 1992). These television characters display a potent version of that strength and understandably become someone to look up to.

Second, girls were more likely to view their favorite character as having socially acceptable behavior; for example, they chose characters that were more kind and helpful. Hoffner (1996) found a similar finding where boys and girls were more likely to identify female characters as engaging in more positive social behaviors than male characters. These parasocial interactions may be an opportunity for girls to learn scripts or schemas related to social behavior.

Other character attributes, although not significant by gender or abuse status, were also important attributes in the favorite television character for the child. Nearly a third of the children saw their favorite character as attractive, three quarters as humorous, and over half as intelligent. Previous research has confirmed that girls typically identify or parasocially interact with attractive characters (Hoffner, 1996; Miller & Reeves, 1976; Reeves & Greenberg, 1977; Reeves & Lometti, 1979; Reeves & Miller, 1978). In addition, other studies have suggested intelligence and humor as attributes that encourage identification with television characters (Reeves & Greenberg, 1977; Reeves & Lometti, 1979; Reeves & Miller, 1978).

On the whole, it is clear that children do interact with characters that possess these attributes. Since abused children are less likely to engage in these interactions, they don't benefit from some of the lessons that these characters may teach them. Future research should investigate other attributes that may be more interesting to abused youngsters. Perhaps, this scale was not inclusive enough to identify attributes that abused children are more likely to seek out.

The second research question was interested in the motivations that abused and non-abused children have for interacting with their favorite television characters. These analyses contributed new information in the investigation of parasocial relationships. Open-ended questions were coded in order to evaluate what types of topics these interactions typically involve and why children have these relationships. By and large, these analyses revealed some interesting findings. In terms of conversational topics, girls were more likely to discuss episode information with their favorite TV character than were boys. One popular stereotype of the sexes is that women like storylines and men

fixate on action sequences (Gray, 1992). Conceivably, girls may be using illusionary companions as a way to learn more about these stereotypical behaviors.

As for why children engage in these relationships, two significant effects were revealed. First, non-abused girls were more likely to express positive affect as a reason for their illusionary conversations than were abused girls. Generally speaking, these relationships seem to be fun for non-abused girls because a similar trend was suggested in analyses of the affect questions. Children were asked how happy or sad they felt as a result of interacting with their favorite character. These results indicated that non-abused girls enjoyed these friendships; they tended to be happier than other children when involved in these parasocial relationships.

The results also suggested that abused girls were the only group who engaged in these relationships because they needed or wanted to give help. Again, a trend from the affect analyses suggested that abused children were sadder than non-abused children when interacting with their favorite character. Therefore, engaging in these interactions for help reasons may be taxing on the individual rather than fun.

Additionally, some research has reported what types of abused children tend to seek help or receive more help from governmental agencies. Typically, these children have been abused by their parents or foster parents, have had multiple incidents of maltreatment, have had suicidal feelings, and have either had a medical check-up or have been in medical care for their abuse (Saunders, Resnick, Hoberman, & Blum, 1994; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). This information suggests that children who have been severely abused may be more likely to turn to characters for help or to give their help. Therefore, this parasocial relationship is not an

alternative to friendships like it may operate for non-abused children, but a functional relationship where tough problems are addressed. Perhaps, if a larger sample of abused children was collected, an analysis could be computed for the severity of abuse that children incur to understand why children engage in these relationships across different levels of abuse.

As well, the literature suggests, abused children not only have problems in their household, but they also have a hard time making friends (Salzinger et al., 1993; Wolfe, 1999). It is understandable that when they are presented with an opportunity to express themselves or to converse with someone that seems like an interested friend, they may use that time to take care of troubling problems or to see if that person needs someone like they do. Perhaps, they offer help because they know children at school do not help them when they are in need of companionship.

From a methodological point of view, there were several limitations of the study. First, it was exploratory. This examination was not only a first attempt looking at abused children and parasocial relationships, but also the motivations behind these interactions. Given the results obtained from this study, future research should make considerations for the types of predictions associated with parasocial interactions and abused children. In addition, modifications to the motivation questions would help capture different reasons why abused children, in particular, may be turning to these illusionary companions.

Second, there were several obstacles to obtaining a sufficient abused sample. Data collection was extended for one full year in order to collect 30 abused sample interviews. Several organizations that agreed to participate did not anticipate a lack of

interest by their volunteers or interns and had fewer children within the required age range than they originally estimated. Consequently, many participating areas were not able to produce any data. This small sample size inevitably lowered the power of statistical analyses for this investigation. Given this, a larger sample size would offer much more confidence behind the interpretations offered.

Third, considering the barriers related to data collection, the primary researchers were not able to maintain the level of control typically exhibited in experimental situations for the abused sample. This data was collected by on site social workers, volunteers, or interns and inevitably some data was not collected. For the most part, uncollected data consisted of questions from the prevalence scale, affect section, and the open-ended motivation questions. Future research should attempt to have more control over the collection of this data.

Fourth and finally, all participants used in the data analyses were from low SES households. This decision was made because abused children typically come from low SES homes. Although this variable was constant in the analyses, it is important to note that Hoffner (1996) used a sample that was from a more affluent area. Perhaps, some of the differences between this study and Hoffner (1996) are due to the fact that this study involved low SES children.

Lastly, a few important contributions to parasocial research should be highlighted from this investigation. Future research should consider using the new PSI scale questions added in this examination. Although these questions may be more appropriate for children, they did increase the reliability of the scale (Hoffner (1996) $\alpha = .70$; this investigation $\alpha = .79$). Also, a new measure of prevalence was established in these

analyses. This scale was very reliable and produced consistent findings with a similar yes/no question. The use of this new scale could help increase the validity of parasocial interaction if consistent findings were established across similar investigations and within examinations.

Overall, this study reveals some compelling information concerning abused children and parasocial relationships. Although the results are tenuous considering the sample composition, this study can guide future research investigating this fragile population. From this examination, the results propose that abused children may use these parasocial friendships as functional activities where they can attempt to solve some of their problems. This study suggests that even a fun activity like television viewing may be a burdened action for this particular group of children. On the whole, these results are only a starting point to understanding more about television effects on disadvantaged populations. It is essential that this trend continues because understanding how individual differences can change the relationship between content and viewer can not only be applicable to society, but guide theory in the future.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Non-abused children were obtained through a large scale education-based longitudinal study which assesses how children learn. The education research team originally obtained the participating schools by randomly sampling low SES school districts in a metropolitan area. The schools that were available to this investigation were selected based on their enthusiasm during the education project. It was important to obtain children from low SES families because, as Niolon (1999) stated, abused children are more likely to be from low SES families. Therefore, in order to control for income level, the participants all come from the same level of wealth. However, this factor may seem troubling because it is likely that abused children would be in the non-abused sample. From a report by The Children's Defense Fund, children from low SES families are 2.8 times more likely to have inadequate parental care than wealthier children (Sherman, 1997). Even though there is a risk of abused children being in our non-abused sample, that risk is minimal because it should lie within sampling error of the obtained results.

[2]University researchers trained all survey interviewers. For both the abused and non-abused sample, a researcher explained all the facets of the questionnaire to the specified interviewers (Parasocial Interaction, Prevalence, Character Attributes, Motivations, Affect, and Demographics). The instructions were explained in detail, making sure each interviewer understood how to ask the scale questions to solicit the child's spontaneous answers. They were also sensitized to stop immediately if the child

said 'STOP' at any time during the interview process. Lastly, the interviewers had full training for the debriefing of subjects and were informed of all necessary project information if the subjects had any questions regarding the research study. After these in depth training procedures, the interviewer practiced giving the questionnaire using the researcher as a subject or a co-worker from their office.

[3]Please note that all alpha levels reported for this investigation are standardized item alpha, except for the few that are specifically labeled as Cronbach's alpha.

[4]The attractiveness and intelligence subscales were slightly modified for this investigation because they both had problem items that considerably lowered their reliability levels. This investigation dropped the item, *"[insert name of favorite character] is somewhat ugly"* for the attractiveness subscale. The statement *"[insert name of favorite character] is dumb"* was dropped for the intelligence subscale. Even though these items were unreliable the results did not change significantly when the items were eliminated from analyses.

[5]Participants were classified as high on the parasocial interaction scale with an average score of 4 or higher, meaning they at least *"agreed a little"* to each scale item. Proportions for the character attributes and the affect scaled items were determined in the same fashion. Character attributes were high when above 4 or higher on the scale, meaning at least *"agreed a little"*. Affect items were considered high when they were at 2 or higher, they had to be at least "*a little bit happy*" or "*a little bit sad*".

[6]Please note that all log-linear analyses for the motivation questions had, at least, one cell with less than 5 participants. These results should be interpreted with caution because of the small cell sizes.

[7]Television use means were computed by averaging the scores for the amount of television use on a typical weekday and weekend. Response options ranged from 0 to 6 or more hours.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Parasocial Interaction Scale

Answer Selections:

1 = Disagree A lot, 2 = Disagree a Little, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree a Little, 5 = Agree A lot

1. __ makes me feel comfortable, like I'm with a friend.
2. I look forward to watching ___ when his/her show is on.
3. If ___ appeared on another show, I would want to watch it.
4. ___ seems like he/she would be easy to talk to.
5. ___ seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know.
6. If I saw a story about ___ in a newspaper or magazine, I would want to read it.
7. I miss seeing ___ when his/her show isn't on for some reason.
8. If I could, I would like to meet ___ in person.
9. I feel sorry for ___ when he/she makes a mistake.
10. ___ would fit in well with my group of friends.
11. If something happens to ___ I feel bad.
12. I would invite ___ to my birthday party.
13. ___ is the kind-of person I would like to play or hang out with.
14. If ___ lived in my neighborhood we would be friends.

APPENDIX B

Character Attributes

Answer Selections:

1 = Disagree A lot, 2 = Disagree a Little, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree a Little, 5 = Agree A lot

1. ____ is kind.
2. ____ is helpful.
3. ____ is caring.
4. ____ is mean.
5. ____ is violent.
6. ____ is selfish.
7. ____ is handsome/pretty.
8. ____ is good-looking.
9. ____ is somewhat ugly.
10. ____ is funny.
11. ____ says and does funny things.
12. ____ is physically strong.
13. ____ has more strength than most people.
14. ____ is smart.
15. ____ is good at figuring things out.
16. ____ is dumb.

TABLE 1

Parasocial Scale-Item by Item Comparisons

Item #	Abused *M*	Non-abused *M*	*t*	*p*
1	4.03	4.00	.11	.92
2	4.67	4.37	1.03	.31
3	4.20	4.03	.48	.64
4	3.73	3.50	.62	.54
5	3.07	3.47	-1.06	.29
6	4.17	4.23	-.19	.85
7	3.63	3.59	.14	.89
8	4.24	4.27	-.07	.94
9	3.63	3.69	-.15	.88
10	3.66	3.89	-.58	.57
11	3.80	3.70	.27	.79
12	4.03	4.24	-.64	.53
13	4.17	3.80	1.07	.29
14	4.34	4.40	-.19	.85

*$p < .05$.

TABLE 2

Mean Differences in Interval Level Variables by Abused Status and Gender

	Abuse status		Gender	
Variable	Abused	Non-abused	Boy	Girl
Parasocial scale	3.93	3.89	3.80	3.98
Prevalence	1.72*	2.24*	1.79	2.21
Social behavior	4.05	4.06	3.74*	4.28*
Attractiveness	3.67	3.12	3.32	3.46
Humor	4.64	4.37	4.46	4.53
Strength	3.05	3.20	3.60*	2.78*
Intelligence	3.90	3.99	4.00	3.90
Affect				
Sad	1.60	1.45	1.41	1.56
Happy	3.31	3.76	3.06	3.96

*$p < .05$.

TABLE 3

Percentage Differences in Nominal Level Variables by Abused Status and Gender

	Abuse status		Gender	
Variable	Abused	Non-abused	Boy	Girl
Prevalence	31%**	72%**	46%	56%
Conversation Topics				
Liking character	11%	38%	27%	32%
Episode information	22%	33%	9%*	42%*
Interaction w/ character	33%	52%	55%	42%
Other TV	11%	5%	18%*	0%*
Why Parasocial Interaction				
Positive affect	27%	54%	23%*	59%*
Help	36%	13%	31%	14%

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

TABLE 4

Partial Correlations of Variables Controlling for Gender and Abuse Status

Variable	Parasocial	Prevalence	Social	Attractive	Humor	Strength	Intelligence	Affect	Help	Sad	Happy
Parasocial		.11	.39**	.42**	.24	.10	.56**	.11	-.03	-.10	.02
Prevalence			-.15	.01	-.31*	.28*	.03	.32	.15	.23	.65**
Social				.31*	.26*	-.01	.34**	.14	-.23	.01	.01
Attractive					.17	.20	.40**	-.02	-.07	-.25	-.19
Humor						-.22	.27*	-.10	.03	-.07	-.31*
Strength							.38**	.01	.14	-.04	.14
Intelligence								-.06	-.01	-.19	-.15
Affect									-.38*	-.07	.14
Help										.18	.08
Sad											.39**
Happy											

*$p < .05$, two-tailed. **$p < .01$, two-tailed.