

Module 2 Unit 2

This is an **OPTIONAL READING: SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY.**

Singhal, A., and Rogers, E. (2002). A theoretical agenda for entertainment-education. *Communication Theory* 12(2). [excerpt – 6 p.]

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A Theoretical Agenda for Entertainment-Education

With the growing number of entertainment-education (E-E) interventions worldwide, and the extensive evaluation research on their impacts, the time is ripe to explore in-depth the theoretical underpinnings of entertainment-education. This introductory article provides a historical background to this special issue of Communication Theory on entertainment-education, and charts a 5-pronged theoretical agenda for future research on entertainment-education. Theoretical investigations of entertainment-education should pay greater attention to the tremendous variability among entertainment-education interventions (Agenda #1) and to the various resistances to entertainment-education interventions (Agenda #2). E-E theorizing will also benefit from close investigations of the rhetorical, play, and affective aspects of E-E (Agenda #3). Further, E-E "effects" research should consider employing a broader understanding of individual, group, and social-level changes (Agenda #4) and be more receptive to methodological pluralism and measurement ingenuity (Agenda #5).

Agenda #4: Rethinking the Old Conceptualization of Behavior Change

A few years ago, we defined entertainment-education as “the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate, in order to increase knowledge about an issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior” (Singhal & Rogers, 1999, p. 229). Today, we consider this definition of E-E as limited, in that it implies that *individual-level* behavior change is the main purpose of this communication strategy.

Although many past applications of E-E sought to increase individuals’ knowledge, change their attitudes, and alter their overt behavior, an overwhelming focus on individual-level behavior change runs the risk of mistakenly assuming that all individuals (a) are capable of controlling their environment, (b) are on an even playing field, and (c) make decisions of their own free will. Such is seldom the case. For instance, whether or not a commercial female sex worker can protect herself from HIV is often a function of whether or not her male client agrees to use a condom. She is often voiceless, powerless, and vulnerable in such encounters (Singhal & Rogers, in press).

Theoretical investigations of entertainment-education should thus go beyond the exclusive use of individual-level theories and models of preventive health behaviors such as stages-of-change, hierarchy-of-effects model, and social cognitive theory to more multilevel, cultural, and contextual theoretical explanations (McKinlay & Marceau, 1999). Metaphorically speaking, entertainment-education scholars should go beyond

investigating the bobbing of individual corks on surface waters and focus on the stronger undercurrents that determine where cork clusters are deposited along a shoreline (McMichael, 1995).

Some recent E-E investigations have gone beyond studying individual-level behavioral changes to investigate E-E instigated changes at the community level (Papa et al., 2000). In a community-level investigation in India, a popular E-E radio soap opera, accompanied by group listening, local self-help groups, and progressive opinion leaders, brought about changes in group, community, and organizational norms. Interacting with the ground-based context, the year-long E-E radio soap opera led to enhanced levels of *collective efficacy*, defined as the degree to which people in a system believe they can organize and execute courses of action required to achieve collective goals (Bandura, 1997). The villagers, through a process of extensive deliberations, organized to change the system norm on dowry. Since the giving and receiving of dowry payments involves a relationship between families, individual change alone could not alter the practice (Papa et al., 2000). Deeply ingrained cultural norms can often be altered only by concerted action from the collective.

E-E interventions can also model individual *self-efficacy*, defined as an individual's perception of his or her capability to deal effectively with a situation, and one's sense of perceived control over a situation. In the popular E-E television series *Soul City* in South Africa, a new collective behavior was modeled to portray how neighbors might intervene in a domestic violence situation. The prevailing cultural norm in South Africa is for neighbors, even if they wished to help the victim, not to intervene while the domestic abuse is being carried out. Wife (or partner) abuse is seen as a "private" matter carried out in a "private" space, with curtains drawn and behind a front door that is closed. In the *Soul City* series, the neighbors collectively decided to break the ongoing cycle of spousal abuse in a neighborhood home. While a wife-beating episode occurred, they gathered around the abuser's residence and collectively banged their pots and pans, censuring the abuser's actions. This entertainment-education episode highlighted the importance of creatively modeling collective efficacy to energize neighbors, who, for cultural reasons, felt previously inefficacious. Evaluation research found that exposure to the *Soul City* E-E intervention was associated with the willingness to stand outside the home of an abuser and bang pots (Soul City Institute, 2000). After this episode was broadcast, pot banging to stop partner abuse was reported in several locations in South Africa (Singhal & Rogers, in press). Patrons of a local pub in Thembisa Township exhibited a variation of this practice—they collectively banged bottles upon witnessing a man physically abusing his girlfriend (Soul City Institute, 2000).

Theoretical investigations of E-E interventions can additionally benefit from adopting a more nuanced understanding of various types of desired behavior changes: (a) individual versus collective, (b) one-time (e.g., getting an immunization) versus recurring (e.g., physical exercise), (c) self-controlled (e.g., fastening an automobile seat belt) versus other-dependent (e.g., paying and receiving dowry), (d) private (e.g., using a condom) versus public (e.g., cleaning up an unsanitary neighborhood), (e) preventive (e.g., using sunscreen) versus curative (e.g., administering oral rehydration therapy to a baby with diarrhea), (f) costly (e.g., adopting a tractor) versus low cost (e.g., breast-feeding), and (g) high involvement (e.g., enrolling in an adult literacy class) versus low involvement (e.g., buying Girl Scout cookies). The theoretical question to pose is: Are different types of E-E interventions more effective in achieving different types of desired behavior changes? In summary, E-E “effects” research would benefit from a broader understanding of individual, group, and social-level changes.

Agenda Item #5: Employing Methodological Pluralism and Measurement Ingenuity

The history of research on entertainment-education shows that theories can be tested and enhanced in the real world. When social learning theory was initiated, Albert Bandura tested his theory in laboratory settings, such as in the famous Bobo doll experiment on media violence and children’s aggressive behavior (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). The Mexican writer-producer-director Miguel Sabido took Bandura’s theory out of the laboratory and into the real world, designing E-E soap operas portraying socially desirable and undesirable models of behavior. Now Bandura’s cognitive learning/self-efficacy theory is being applied in a wide range of field settings, including in the form of interactive video games by ClickHealth, a Silicon Valley high-tech company with which Bandura and his colleagues are associated. For example, one ClickHealth game is designed to teach children how to more efficaciously live with diabetes. A randomized, controlled clinical trial found that this game led to a 77% decrease in emergency room visits over a 6-month period (Lieberman, 2001). Thus, from the perspective of theoretical usefulness, E-E interventions are something like a piece of toast buttered on both sides; they not only incorporate theory in their design, but also provide an opportunity to test and advance a given theory.

Most past research on entertainment-education effects relied mainly on audience surveys (sometimes coupled with content analyses of E-E messages and with analyses of audience letters). Sypher, McKinley, Ventsam, and Valdeavellano’s article in this special issue points to the advantages of employing methodological pluralism in complementing survey techniques with ethnographic methods, including the use of fo-

cus group interviews, participant observation, in-depth interviews, letters from audience members, and input from trained peer promoters. The article by Michael Slater and Donna Rouner in this issue calls for greater use of laboratory experiments on entertainment-education messages in order to better understand the theoretical mechanisms through which E-E affects individuals' behavior. The article by D. Lawrence Kincaid in this issue proposes a novel method for testing theories of drama, employing the techniques of image mapping and multidimensional scaling. Suruchi Sood explores the theoretic construct of audience involvement in her article in this special issue, analyzing audience letters written to an entertainment-education radio soap opera in India.

Audience letters represent a rather "pure" form of audience feedback, and E-E scholars should consider tapping the research potential of these messages more fully. These letters are usually unsolicited, unprompted (and, hence, free of researcher bias), in the writer's own language, and rich in insights about how the E-E intervention affects the audience (Law & Singhal, 1999). Such data also costs very little to gather. Over 400,000 letters from viewers were received by Dordarshan, the government television network in India, in response to an E-E soap opera *Hum Log* ("We People"), providing rich insights about the program's effects on highly involved audiences.

Telephone hotlines also represent a useful programmatic and research resource in E-E interventions. A popular song, "I Still Believe," performed by Lea Salonga in the Philippines, was used to encourage telephone calls from adolescents to "Dial-a-Friend," where they could receive information and advice about contraception and other sexually related topics. Trained professional counselors maintained four hotlines, which averaged over 1,000 calls per week (Rimon, 1989). Telephone helplines for abused women also supplemented the *Soul City* prime-time television series on domestic violence. Some 180,000 calls were answered in 5 months (when the *Soul City* series on domestic violence was broadcast in late 1999), and monitoring of call data suggested that in places like Johannesburg, only 5% of the calls could be answered during peak times; the remaining 95% got a busy signal (Soul City Institute, 2000).

E-E researchers increasingly realize the importance of having more robust measures to assess audience members "degree of exposure" to the E-E intervention and to gauge the degree to which E-E interventions spur interpersonal communication between audience and nonaudience members (which represents a measure of the "indirect" effects of an E-E intervention in a version of the "two-step flow" process). A reliable measure of the audience members' degree of exposure to an E-E intervention is essential, given its centrality as an independent variable to predict audience effects (Hornik, Gandy, Wray, & Stryker, 2000). In

audience surveys, respondents are usually asked the extent to which they have been exposed to the E-E intervention (whether a soap opera, or a miniseries, or some other genre), and data are recorded in terms of the number of episodes heard or seen, or perhaps on an ordinal scale of low, medium, or high exposure. Such self-reports to a general exposure question may be unreliable. Past research shows that E-E interventions tend to spur a great deal of interpersonal communication among audience members and also among audience members and their spouses, children, relatives, and friends, who may not be directly exposed to the E-E intervention. However, this important indirect effect of E-E interventions has not been adequately captured in past E-E research studies (Rogers et al., 1999).

In order to have more robust measures of degree of exposure and to more adequately gauge indirect effects of E-E interventions, we recommend that during the production of E-E messages, multiple *markers* should be proactively incorporated. Markers are distinctive elements of a message that are identifiable. The simplest way of introducing a marker in an E-E intervention is to rename an existing product so that it becomes identifiable with only that product. For instance, in the popular St. Lucian family-planning radio soap opera *Apwe Plezi* (After the Pleasure), a new condom brand called Catapult was introduced. This new term was identified by 28% of the radio program's listeners, validating their claim of direct exposure to the program, and by 13% of the nonlisteners, suggesting that the message was diffused via interpersonal channels, and thus providing a test of diffusion of innovations theory (Vaughan, Regis, & St. Catherine, 2000).

Alternatively, a marker might consist of creatively naming characters in E-E programs, like the skirt-chasing character Scattershot in *Nasebery Street*, a radio soap opera about sexually responsible fatherhood in Jamaica (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Scattershot became a common term in Jamaican discourse, as in "Oh, you Scattershot you," providing an opportunity to trace the direct and indirect effects of listening to the radio program.

The most powerful markers model new culturally appropriate realities to break oppressive power structures in society, exemplified by the collective pot banging by neighbors in the South African entertainment-education series *Soul City*, so as to stop wife or partner abuse (Singhal & Rogers, in press). Markers, which model new realities, not only enhance the message content of the E-E intervention, but also provide additional validation for whether or not audience members were directly or indirectly exposed to the E-E intervention. In summary, theoretical investigations of E-E "effects" would benefit by employing methodological pluralism and measurement ingenuity.