

Research Critique Paper: A Research Evaluation of Stephanie Goldberg's CNN Article,
"TV can boost self-esteem of white boys, study says."

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Introduction

Academic reporting in journalism is critical for informing the general public about the latest findings in academic fields, including the social sciences. Though social science reporting is justified in its importance, it also has room for improvement. The accuracy and clarity of social science reporting is often undervalued in favor of including more eye-catching journalistic aspects; Stephanie Goldberg, a reporter for CNN, is guilty of doing just this. Her article, “TV can boost self-esteem of white boys, study says” seeks to cover the findings of a study conducted by Nicole Martins and Kristen Harrison, entitled “Racial and Gender Differences in the Relationship Between Children’s Television Use and Self-Esteem.” Though Goldberg’s effort to inform the public of emerging social science research is with good intention, missing elements from the original research in addition to misleading implications result in an article that fails to represent the original research well.

Aspects of Original Research Not Recognized in Goldberg’s Article

One of the major downfalls of Goldberg’s reporting is her lack of evidence and references to the original research conducted by Martins and Harrison. By failing to inform the reader of the critical elements included in the research—many of which were crucial to the study’s success—Goldberg loses out on the opportunity to give her readers a wholesome representation of the study she is reporting on.

Theory and Hypothesis

It is interesting that in an article about social science research, Goldberg omitted two pieces of information that are crucial to the understanding of the study’s purpose: the theory and the hypotheses. Martins and Harrison’s original theory is that media exposure has an effect on people’s self-esteem, and they use this information to develop two hypotheses; whether television viewing will predict lower self-esteem, and well as if the opposite is true for boys

when compared to girls (Martins & Harrison, 2012, p. 339-343). By including this information in their study, Martins and Harrison give their readers a clear picture of what study seeks to test. By contrast, Goldberg's exclusion of this information leaves her reader guessing as to what the original purpose of the experiment is, as well as if the results reflect the original hypothesis of the researchers.

Method

Goldberg does not mention the methods that the researchers use to arrive at their result, and thus does not report on a large chunk of the study. Martins and Harrison's study benefits from a well-thought-out method that is clear and detailed, and the absence of this in Goldberg's article does not provide Martins and Harrison with the credibility they deserve. Three aspects of the method in particular are not covered in Goldberg's article, despite being important elements to the original research.

Conceptualization. Goldberg does not mention the conceptualization—the conversion of the ideas in a theory into clear, measurable pieces—of Martins and Harrison's study. The original research is conceptualized by taking the three ideas present in the original theory—“*media exposure has an effect on people's self-esteem*”—and specifying what exactly is to be measured (p. 339). In this case, *media exposure* is represented by the hours of television that are watched per week, *people* are, more specifically, black and white children aged 7-13, and *self-esteem* is represented by the answers to a questionnaire involving the evaluation of one's self-esteem (p. 345-346). The conceptualization process strengthens Martins and Harrison's research, because it provides the study with specific, representational concepts to measure, as opposed to just general ideas. Goldberg's omission of the conceptualized variables leaves it unclear as to what is being tested in relation to the overarching theory that is presented.

Operationalization. In addition to the conceptualization process, Goldberg also does not cover how the resulting concepts are operationalized, or the way that the concepts in the hypothesis are measured. According to the original research of Martins and Harrison, *media exposure* is measured at an interval level, in which the children were asked how many hours of television—between 0 and 5—they watch at different times of the weekday and the weekend (p. 345). Furthermore, *self-esteem* is measured at an ordinal level, using the Lawrence Self-Esteem Questionnaire, and its subsequent scoring system that interprets higher scores as a higher level of self-esteem (p. 346). Finally, the *people* variable is measured at a nominal level, by simply asking the children to identify their gender and ethnicity. The successful operationalization of variables by Martins and Harrison provides them with simple, effective ways to analyze each of their variables. By neglecting to cover the operationalization process, Goldberg leaves her readers with no way to determine how the variables are measured, and how those measurements are interpreted in the results.

Control variables. Finally, control variables are important for making sure the experiment is testing what it should be testing, and is not influenced by outside factors. Martins and Harrison make sure that in their study, they control for age as well as satisfaction with perceived body shape (p. 346). Despite the importance of control variables in the original research, Goldberg fails to mention them in her own article, and thus doesn't paint a clear picture of which variables are being tested and which are being controlled.

Limitations Stated in Original Research

Another aspect present in the original research yet absent in Goldberg's articles are the possible limitations as described by Martins and Harrison. This section is a critical aspect in any social science research, as it points out the possible places in which other scientists can replicate the study and possibly test for new knowledge. Martins and Harrison note the limitations or

uncertainties of their study at the end of their research article, including the fact that the genre distinctions between the television content watched by each child re not assessed, as well as the fact that the results cannot be taken for causal relations without further research (p. 352-353). By mentioning these limitations, Martins and Harrison make the intellectual decision to recognize the flaws in their own research, while also encouraging others in the field to follow-up with their research in order to better the academic community. Though she may not have realized it, Goldberg's decision to not mention the limitations of the study invites her readers to jump to the conclusion that the original researchers may not have acknowledged these limitations. This invites further criticism of the study, and does not give Martins and Harrison credit.

Critiques of Original Research

Though it is not considered an element of the original research stated by Martins and Harrison yet ignored by Goldberg, Goldberg may have benefitted from providing her own critiques on the original research. Her readers would have benefitted from the knowledge of possible flaws in the study that were not noted, the most prominent being flaws in the sample and its implications for generalizability. For example, the children surveyed were all from Illinois and all identified as white or black. Thus, it brings into question whether the results of the survey can be generalized to children from all ethnicities all around the country. By omitting her own critiques of the study, Goldberg loses the chance to prove herself as a well-read news journalist and invite her readers to think critically about the future academic research they may encounter.

Misleading Implications in Goldberg's Article

The second major weakness in Goldberg's article is the misleading way she presents some of the information found in the study. Though she is well intentioned in her attempts to frame the new story so that it is eye-catching to her online audience, along the way she loses the original purpose of the research elements she is trying to discuss. This ill attempt was most

prevalent in two different aspects: her misconceptions regarding the sample population as stated in the study, as well as her choice to include additional, and often irrelevant, studies.

Misconceptions Regarding Sample Population

Goldberg fails to represent the original intent of the researchers in her discussion of the study's sample population (Goldberg, 2012). According to the title of her article as well as the majority of the text, Goldberg seems to be implying that the main purpose of the study (and its subsequent result) was focused on the impact of media exposure on white boys in particular, when in reality, this may not have been the case. In the discussion of Martins and Harrison's research, many of the points discuss revolve around why it was that the self-esteem of black children and white girls were negatively affected, rather than that of white boys. Therefore, it is inappropriate for Goldberg to assume that the results represent an unquestionably causal relationship between television exposure and heightened self-esteem in young boys, while there were other sample population groups involved in the research. Thus, Goldberg loses a part of the original article's purpose in her article.

Inclusion of Additional Sources

Toward the latter half of her article, Goldberg starts to incorporate comments and discussion from other sources, such as Nielsen, the chair of the media committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and other social scientists (2012). Though the information presented may have been related to the original study, it was not needed in an article that focused specifically on one study. Goldberg should have focused exclusively on the study at hand, only taking additional comments from those who were directly involved. By reaching out to other sources, Goldberg insinuates that there is not enough information to be gathered from the research, thus diminishing the credibility and purpose of Martins and Harrison's work.

Conclusion and Suggestions for the Future of Science Journalism

Many news journalists face the predicament in which Goldberg finds herself, which is deciding to write either an eye-catching article or an informative one. Though Goldberg did refer back to the original research, her efforts to catch the reader's attention through the inclusion of additional sources and a more attractive sample population resulted in an article that failed to provide a whole coverage of the research, while simultaneously blurring the lines of the study's original purpose. Additionally, Goldberg left out a wealth of information that was stated in the original research in favor of more appealing aspects such as quotes and personal stories. Thus, Goldberg was not able to find a solution to the familiar new journalism problem and write both an appealing and informative article. There are suggestions, however, that Goldberg could have followed in order to balance these two aspects of news journalism and make both the public and the academic world happy.

One suggestion is to personalize the news story within the boundaries of the research, as opposed to going to outside sources. Thus, if Goldberg was really seeking to find social scientists to speak on advice gathered from the study that would be applicable to the general public, who better to approach than the original scientists that conducted the study. They would be able to provide insight into personal applications of the research to everyday life, but would do so in a way that stayed true to the tone of the study.

Furthermore, it is crucial that the world of news journalism not underestimate their audience. Sure, a news journalism article that only discusses research for two paragraphs before moving on to how it is applicable in everyday life may sound more likely to sell, but in many cases the people who are reading the articles are genuinely interested in what new studies have found to be true. Thus, it is important that Stephanie Goldberg and the rest of the news journalism world to make sure their coverage is wholesome, genuine, and truly representative.

References

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