31

MEDIA AND LEARNING OF THE SOCIAL WORLD

Srividya Ramasubramanian and Patrick R. Johnson

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Children and young people are social creatures who observe, learn, and understand themselves and others through the real world and mediated experiences (Isbouts & Ohler, 2013; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011; Walsh & Ward, 2008). News stories and fictional narratives are common ways children learn about social identities, values, and hierarchies. This chapter focuses on how media narratives teach children how to navigate the social world, the roles and expectations of various social groups, and how to develop social relationships with members of various groups. These lessons shape their sense of self and others and how they identify themselves within social contexts (Bovill & Livingstone, 2001; Dill-Shackleford et al. 2017; Lemish, 2015; Ramasubramanian et al., 2020).

It is critical for those working with young people to understand what types of media messages youth use and how youth shape and are shaped by the media. It is important to consider the different social contexts children are a part of and the complex ways media are interwoven into the co-construction of their social worlds (Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2019). Towards this end, the current chapter takes a multidisciplinary, intersectional, and global perspective to synthesize literature from media studies, sociology, and education. It reviews the role of media within the socialization of children, the ways in which such learning differs through various developmental stages of children's lives, the social world represented within children's media and their effects on children's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. It has implications for researchers, educators, and policymakers who work with young people in both formal and informal settings such as schools, neighborhood groups, online communities, and youth organizations.

How Children Learn about the Social World

Children's abilities to develop schemas, or scripts, is a critical part of their development and of their learning of the symbolic in the social world. These scripts, which include things as simple as taking a bath or getting ready for bed, are seen in children as young as three years (Hudson et al., 1997). Toddlers begin to understand that people and objects are distinctly different from themselves (Piaget, 1930). This distinction creates a trajectory of learning through which a child

can acculturate into their greater social world over a period of time. Observations during these early stages of life provide children with many of the scripts, or schemas, which they hold into adolescence and adulthood. From ages 2 to 7, children are still unable to rationalize the logic or symbolism of what they see. Because of this, as children experience the social world through media, they begin to develop scripts to organize, or operationalize, what they are being exposed to.

By age 7, children are in the gradual process of developing the cognitive and emotional maturity to distinguish fact from fiction. Therefore, they are much more likely to confuse facts with fantasy narratives as they construct their real world from these mediated experiences (Nikken & Peeters, 1988; Woolley & Ghossainy, 2013). As children develop more concrete understanding of the social world, they continue to create schemas in which to organize groups, ideas, and experiences into manageable chunks (Wartella & Pila, 2020). Their models about the world around them change to fit the social needs that are developmentally appropriate (Calvert, 2020). As children grow up, they have a better grasp of fantasy versus fiction. They emerge into adolescence having undergone a series of arguably drastic shifts in their learning of the social world around them.

Adolescence marks significant role transitions, conflicts, and choices, which are shaped by several factors such as peer group and media. Come adolescence, this socialization also involves how teens understand themselves, as well as how they educate their parents. For example, LGBTQ teens use LGBTQ content and models to rationalize how the world sees them and therefore how their parents can understand their gendered and sexual identities (Mares et al., 2021). In some regards, these become the stereotypes children hold into their adolescence and adulthood.

Media as Agents of Socialization for Children

Sociocultural experiences such as learning from community interaction are also central to meaning making (Vygotsky, 1930/1981). From a sociocultural perspective, learning about the social world is influenced by individual cultures and experiences with people and objects within the culture, rather than a generalized experience for all children based only on their age group. What adults such as family members, teachers, or other community members share with children have a significant impact on how scripts are internalized. These connections are then shared with peers, who too shape meaning making, and the cycle creates a cultural knowledge that is communicated among its members. Children develop differently depending on the sociocultural landscape they experience and live within (Thi Kim Anh & Marginson, 2013).

From this perspective, media as cultural products and institutions serve as learning agents in how children develop their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of the world. Media are important institutions of cultural socialization for children, which are enmeshed and embedded within other social institutions such as family, education, faith groups, and so on. For instance, Nathanson (2010) has emphasized the role of parental mediation through methods such as co-viewing and active conversations that can significantly influence how children perceive and make sense of media content.

It is also true, though, that the time spent with media by children is increasingly becoming higher than with other agents of socialization such as schools and families (Rideout & Robb, 2019; Smahel et al., 2020). Due to the digital revolution, rapid media proliferation, the convergence of media formats, and relatively low costs of data access, children and adolescents have greater access to media at a younger age than previous generations. It is not uncommon for children from middle-class families in many parts of the world to own their computers, tablets,

and cell phones from a very young age (Rideout & Robb, 2019). Indeed, young people are considered by some as "digital natives" since they are born and socialized into digital technologies from a very young age (Burn et al., 2010).

We also need to contend with the fact that almost all aspects of everyday social relations and practices of children are increasingly being shaped by and embedded within media and communication systems (Livingstone, 2009). Therefore, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes about the world around them are "mediatized" in ways such that technology and everyday living are intertwined (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). So much so that media-free times and places for children are becoming increasingly difficult to carve out and even imagine. Multiple media use, media multitasking, and cross-media usage are especially the norm in several industrialized and wealthy nations. Conversations with friends and family about news and entertainment are common ways to bond with others. This has especially been true during the COVID-19 pandemic, when children's screen time has skyrocketed due to virtual schooling, social distancing, and lockdown measures (Götz & Lemish, in press). The focus of the conversations during this time has been on the educational benefits of media and the importance of digital literacy for social connectedness, especially in places heavily impacted by the deadly virus around the world (Sarwatay et al., 2021).

The Social World in Children's Media Content

The media world offers children the opportunity to experience social worlds beyond what is available in their immediate surroundings. They teach children what it means to be human, how to understand one's positionality in society, and what it means to be an insider or outsider within a social group. Narratives allow children to consider various social scenarios and throw light on the ways in which social relationships are constructed communicatively within those contexts. For children who are immersed in mediated worlds, their understanding of the world, especially the social world, is heavily shaped by the images, narratives, and information they routinely consume in the media.

Cultivation theory describes how growing up in a media-saturated environment shapes viewers' sense of social reality, which in turn influences behaviors and beliefs (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Gerbner, 1998). Although this theory was first applied to television research, it has now been applied to the broader media-rich environment that children inhabit such as video games (Martins et al., 2009). The cultivation differential suggests that heavy media users are more likely than light media users to have a biased perception of the world around them. One of the implications is that even fictional stories can have psychological effects, just like factual information. Their perceived reality is closer to the mediated world rather than the "real world." These biased perceptions are called "first order effects" and the ways in which these perceptions shape values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are termed "second order effects" (Hawkins & Pingree, 1980; van Mierlo & van den Bulck, 2004).

A related concept is symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 2000), which refers to the absence and invisibility of certain social groups within media and other symbol systems in our societies. Social groups that are considered low status within social hierarchies based on gender, race, social class, religion and other such identifiers are often erased from the media landscape in systematic ways. Existing studies indicate that racial/ethnic minorities are consistently underrepresented in media in general, across various genres, and in programming for children more specifically (Behm-Morawitz & Ortiz, 2012; Hamlen & Imbesi, 2020; Martins et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2009). For instance, Williams and colleagues (2009), found that 89.5% of lead characters and 85.5% of secondary characters are male. Similarly, lead characters in TV shows

targeted at preschoolers continue to be predominantly male and white (Peruta & Powers, 2017; Hamlen & Imbesi, 2020). Asian, Latinx and Indigenous characters are especially under-represented. Dill-Shackleford and colleagues (2016) call for more inclusive media representation and counter-stereotypical portrayals, especially of multiply marginalized groups, within children's media.

The Effects of Media on Children's Learning About the Social World

Social learning theory (Bandura, 2001) asserts that sociocultural influences are critically important to human behaviors and attitudes. Children develop their understanding of the social world through symbols and environmental events. These symbols are ways in which people can communicate their experiences and have shared social values. These symbols are also learned from modeling, and the models became something for people to imitate. Through abstract modeling of media characters and narratives, children are constantly learning how social systems operate and indeed at a macro-level, these experiences change the overall socio-political environment in which they live. Whereas there is the potential for dramatic social change, media, within this framework, also has the capacity to affect children's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

Another important dimension of social learning theory is the role of media in learning about moral reasoning. From ages 5 to 7, much of children's concept of morality is defined by physical consequences of actions (Kohlberg, 1975). Many of the cartoons and movies that children interact with prominently feature a hero/villain dichotomy where the heroes' actions are rewarded, and the villains physically punished. This allows for children to learn the differences between being morally right or wrong, thus positioning good against evil, and creating a lasting schema of the world. When children watch media narratives, they learn what is morally right and wrong based on whether media characters are punished or rewarded in both explicit and implicit ways. For example, when a child watches *PAW Patrol* and they see the Kitten Catastrophe Crew being physically punished for doing bad things, it teaches them that if one were to do something bad then they too would face consequences. As children become adolescents, they develop conventional morality and enact the values they began learning in the first stage in their interpersonal relationships (Kohlberg, 1975). These relationships also help to establish social norms and social groupings, which are sometimes defined by the cultural texts members consume, including from the media. This is oftentimes affirmed when understanding children's learning of gendered social and moral norms about ideas such as sexuality and body image (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004).

Within media contexts, affective disposition theory posits that moral judgments about media characters influence enjoyment of media (Raney, 2004; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). When a character's behavior is seen as moral, then there is an attachment to or care for the character. Raney (2004) contends that the stronger the reaction to the character, the greater the enjoyment. For instance, Baker and Raney (2007) found that traditional gender roles, as evidenced through superheroes in children's cartoons, socialize children to elevate moral behaviors attached to male characters.

Children use media as a model that therefore not only informs their learning of the social world, but also influences their behaviors within it. The literature on children's media and social representations from around the world over the last few decades has documented popular media stereotypes of different social groups and the serious negative consequences they could have on such topics such as aggressive behaviors, low self-esteem, cyberbullying, eating disorders, and other negative effects (Livingstone, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013). Among older children, for instance, Ward, Vandenbosch, and Eggermont (2015) surveyed nearly 600 Belgian

boys about their reading of men's magazines of various sorts. They found that reading these kinds of magazines led to objectifying women and was significantly related to gender stereotyped beliefs even six months later. However, scholars show that when such messages are mediated through parent-child discussions, media literacy initiatives or exposure to more positive counter-stereotypical role models, these biases can be reduced (Nathanson, 2010; Ramasubramanian, 2007; Ramasubramanian et al., 2020).

Social learning theory can also include how children learn socially necessary concepts such as trust and empathy to build positive social relationships. Preschoolers, for example, were found to learn best from character models that exhibited the strongest character trait of trust (Schlesinger et al., 2016). Children's interactions with the media often include rich connections through parasocial relationships. For example, U.S. teens wishfully identify with popular Japanese manga comic heroines and adopt mannerisms and attitudes of the characters whom they idolize (Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012). They treat media characters as real friends, often positioning them as social partners to fill voids within their current social environment. These parasocial relationships, which are enhanced through increased digital and social media exposure, create deep emotional attachments that, in turn, teach children about social experiences they will encounter.

Through coordinated media initiatives, a variety of media spaces (such as streaming TV, social media networks, online magazines, blogs, interactive museum exhibits, video games, and the like) can bring about social change in meaningful ways to help children mitigate social stereotypes. For instance, Ramasubramanian (2016) demonstrates how alternative transmedia storytelling through fictional TV streaming series such as *East Los High* that included a majority Latinx-American cast of young actors as well as a non-fictional interactive storytelling space such as *Question Bridge* that examines Black masculinity through a question-and-answer video format are community-engaged media initiatives that have successfully addressed difficult topics such as teenage pregnancy, sexual health, racism, and gendered violence. Social media, in particular, are powerful spaces for collaboration and civic engagement to cultivate political participation, community-building, and other ways of developing active citizenship among young people (Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020; Ramasubramanian et al., 2020). For instance, the online magazine, *Latinitas*, serves as an exception in the otherwise predominantly white space of children's media to create opportunities for young Latinas in Texas to express their opinions through online spaces.

Conclusion

If one were to collectively consider the cognitive, sociocultural, and moral perspectives of child development, then the context of media influence becomes increasingly more relevant to how children and adolescents come to learn about the social world. From a generational perspective, cohorts of young people experience similarities in how they experience the world around us. Terms such as millennials, Gen Z, and so on take on specific cultural meanings in terms of the shared patterns of social experiences and expectations across generations. The roles and expectations that children are socialized into could vary vastly across different cohorts, geographical regions, cultural contexts, and communities even within societies.

Despite rapid proliferation of digital technologies around the world among young people, the speeds and rates of adoption of media technologies are slower for socially marginalized kids, especially those from lower income groups (Götz et al., 2018; Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2019; Ramasubramanian, 2016). Several content analytical studies examine how social groups are portrayed across various media types and genres. However, only a few of these systematic

studies focus specifically on children's media content. More work is needed on children and adolescents' media representations of social groups around the world, especially among culturally, economically, and linguistically marginalized groups who are systematically ignored, neglected, and misrepresented in the media.

Critical media effects perspectives (Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2020) suggest that it is important to consider questions of power, intersectionality, context, and agency in understanding how media influence and shape social worlds, including for children. As Alper and colleagues (2016) and Jordan and Prendella (2019) argued elsewhere, one needs to consider the "invisible children," especially those who do not belong to Western Educated Industrialized Rich Democratic (WEIRD) nations to get a more nuanced theoretical and practical perspective on how various types of media shape children from different subcultures around the world across various age groups. Through media literacy initiatives in the long-term, trauma-informed approaches to media education, and greater representation of marginalized groups in children's programming (Ramasubramanian et al., 2020; Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015), we can make the media world that children inherit, inhabit, and influence, more culturally inclusive, socially relevant, and politically active.

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