



## **MEDIATING *COPS*: AN ANALYSIS OF VIEWER REACTION TO REALITY TV\***

By

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines viewer reaction and response to the reality police program *COPS*. Survey data were collected from 117 undergraduate students enrolled in Justice Studies courses and additional focus group data were gathered from 35 of the respondents. A path model was constructed, positing that gender, race, and having been the victim of a property or a non-property crime would have significant effects upon two attitude scales constructed about policing and fear of crime. These measures of attitude were expected to affect how often respondents watched the program and how violent they perceived the program content to be. Watching frequency and perceived violence in turn were expected to affect how satisfied the respondents were with the *COPS* episode they viewed and the program overall. Using path analysis, the derived model conformed well to the reality of the data producing a chi-square that is small (23.71 with 20 degrees of freedom) and non-significant ( $p=0.26$ ). Some focus group data also complemented the path analytic model stressing the relevance of the program's violent content and desensitizing effects.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Channel surfing televised waves of news, drama, and documentaries has become an American pastime. But clicking the remote control and scanning through a satellite sea of selections has more recently veered television viewers into the realm of reality programming. By rolling news, drama, and documentary styles into one low cost wave with high ratings, reality-programming takes the traumas of life, captured live on film or dramatically reenacted, and turns them into prime time television series. On a continuum from *America's Funniest Home Videos* to *America's Most Wanted*, reality programming gives its audience a glimpse of some of society's most laughable members as well as some of its most lethal.

One pivotal point on the reality programming continuum is the popular prime time series *COPS*. Neither meant to be funny nor an interactive form of crime control, *COPS* is rather a voyeuristic, video-cam perspective on police work (Andersen 1995). Currently in its eleventh season, the program's reel footage is filmed in ride-along fashion with U.S. law enforcement officials. As a crux point on the reality programming continuum, *COPS* has been deemed a form of info-tainment

(Surette 1998; Hallett and Powell 1995), part of the police show genre (Danielson et al. 1996), and a docu-cop show [end page 169] (Andersen 1995). These research classifications, however, are concerned with the program's content rather than the routine viewer's interpretation of *COPS*.

Examining the impact of reality programs, such as *COPS*, is important. Television and the police are both forms of social force and control and when combined in the production of reality, the human impacts of that joint effort can result in more than public entertainment. The symbolic interactionist tradition informs us that being actively engaged people participate in the viewing process. In his examination of *Television Culture*, John Fiske (1987) extends this tradition by holding that people are readers, reactors, and re-interpreters who bring their individual social residual factors to the television screen. Considering Fiske's (1987) contention, it follows that viewer interest and satisfaction with on-the-scene police work packaged into a half hour television series might be significantly related to viewers' a priori thoughts about crime and social control.

This study examines the relationship between the reality television program *COPS* and the social viewers' reaction to it. Data were collected from 117 Arizona State University students enrolled in Justice Studies courses during the spring 1997 academic semester. A path model was constructed, positing that gender, race, and having been the victim of a property or a non-property crime would have significant effects upon two attitude scales constructed about policing and fear of crime. These measures of attitude were expected to significantly affect how often respondents watched the program and how violent they perceived the program content to be. Watching frequency and perceived violence in turn were expected to affect how satisfied the respondents were with a *COPS* episode they viewed and the program overall. Using path analysis, the derived model was found to conform well to the reality of the data. Some focus group data also complemented the path analytic model.

## THE LAW IN TV LAND

At its core, television is a viewable source of information and entertainment, displaying and imitating the traumas of everyday life in relation to the law (Ronell 1995). Whether one is watching *School House Rock's* version of how a bill becomes a law, a John Wayne western, *Law & Order*, *Geraldo*, *Homicide*, *Hard Copy*, *COPS*, *Court TV*, the nightly news, or the latest commercial for accident attorneys at law, justice issues pervade what people see on television. In turn, people watch, and hence make popular, programs that reflect the issues that pervade their lives, minds, and times.

The crime content of television programs is hardly debatable. Immersing the story line, crime even embodies the character content of people on television. For example, such recognizable figures as Deputy Dog, Dan Rather, Forensic Specialist Quincy, and Special Agent Fox Mulder have all dealt with the topic of crime in its many forms: fictional, factual, physical, and futuristic. Carte blanche access to a variety of televised crimes is concentrated in commercial culture, evoking criticism and societal concern (Bogart 1995; Gerbner, Mowlana, and Schiller 1996). Fearing its effects on the future, namely children, the "boob-tube" has been branded a harbinger of Huxley's *Brave New World* or an Orwellian form of thought control, broadcasting a 24 hour [end page 170] overabundance of images and acts of aggression, sex, and violence (Gerbner 1994; Gerbner, Mowlana, and Schiller 1996).

Whether television is a timeless machine propelling and prophesying the production of what H. G. Wells would deem Morlock and Eloi people (Wells 1999), such literarily enhanced fears still embed themselves in the relationship between television violence and the level of violence in society. Researching program content reveals reflections and portrayals of violence that often do

not coincidence with real life. For instance, Bogart (1995:160) points out that property crime receives little air time, while the prime time murder rate soars 1,000 times higher than the actual U.S. crime-clock rate of one every 22 minutes. Over representation of violent crime is posited to take its toll and leave an attitudinal impact upon its viewers (Bogart 1995; Gerbner 1994).

Regardless of its possible impacts, the crime genre is a recognized tradition of television. And of late, the ideological concepts of consumerism and social control inherent to TV land have been gelling crime forms into the latest televised trend, known as reality-based police programming (Cavender 1999). *COPS*, *Real Stories of the Highway Patrol*, *Top Cops*, *L.A.P.D.*, and *America's Most Wanted* are prime examples of current "crime time" (Ronell 1995:109) television. These programs promote the police as an omnipresent force, or as Ronell (1995:113) posits, "their present is not presence: they are television . . . always on, they are on your case, in your face" as you flick through the channels. Still, these programs have high ratings and a reference group of social subjects caught somewhere between "Kansas and Oz" (Ronell 1995:112) tuning into *COPS* and perhaps turning on to their own social interests.

Primarily concerned with program content, most current reality television research has focused on the social dimensions portrayed, rather than the societal reactions provoked, by reality police programs. Similarly, research on the social interests that reality television viewers bring to the set have yet to be fully explored. Nonetheless, some exploratory research has been conducted and more explicit analyses in the area of reality police programming are forthcoming.

Most notable in this area are Mary Beth Oliver's recent studies on reality-based police programs. For example, in Oliver's (1994) study she examined portrayals of crime, race, and aggression on several reality law enforcement shows (including *COPS*), and found through content analysis that violent crimes were overrepresented, as were the number of cases actually solved by police officers. She also found that white people were most frequently portrayed as police officers, while blacks and Hispanics were more often depicted as criminal suspects on the various shows. In a more recent article, Oliver and Armstrong (1999) dealt more directly with the cultivation hypothesis and found that exposure to reality-based police shows is related to viewers having higher estimates of crime (especially of prevalence among African Americans).

Similarly, Hallett and Powell (1995) conducted a study, which specifically targeted viewer interpretations of the *COPS* program, but their viewer/reference group consisted solely of police officers that had taken part in the show's production. In trying [end page 171] to gauge what cops thought about *COPS*, the Hallett and Powell study slighted the routine television viewer from the line of response research inquiry. Still, their research found that the officers thought the program was a good vehicle for gaining public acknowledgment and understanding of the pressures of police work.

Another example of the range of research in this area includes Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash, and Weaver's (1992) study of *Women Viewing Violence*, in which recording women's reactions to *Crimewatch UK*, a European version of *America's Most Wanted*, was part of the project's stated purpose. This Schlesinger et al. (1992) study of viewer reactions was gender specific and concentrated on explaining the experience of visual violence. Using surveys and focus groups, the study found that the women viewers' reactions to the program were related to their own experience of crime, violence, general orientation to policing, and ethnic background. More specifically, Schlesinger et al. (1992) found in their examination of *Crimewatch UK* that female respondents perceived non-property crimes to be more consequential than property crimes. Women who had been victims of violence expressed a higher fear of crime, yet the majority of the respondents, whether they had been victims or not, expressed a conscious concern about the threat of being

attacked. Presentation of the police in the program was understood for its public image purposes, yet police availability and responses were viewed with varied amounts of doubt and conviction, splintering on the basis of respondent race and personal experience. Other applicable sources include the University of Texas at Austin's national yearlong study (1994-1995) of the amount and types of violence shown on the numerous television series that make up the reality-programming continuum (Danielson et al. 1996). The succinct finding that "police shows are the most violent reality programs" (Danielson et al. 1996:26) sums up these shows' vivid illustration of the social potential for violence to occur in word, act, and consequence.

How reflective of real police work these programs are is a point of discord. In a non-academic excerpt from Debra Seagal's diary (1993), written while she was working as a story analyst for the program *American Detective*, Seagal debunks the editing techniques used to create the so-called reality of reality-based television. Deeming reality-based police programming a "sordid enterprise" (Seagal 1993:53), she details the reduction and augmentation of numerous hours of police film footage that are screened, sliced, and squeezed into the shows. These same processes are discussed by John Langley, the executive producer and creator of *COPS*, on the *COPS* website (2001). However, he refers to them as "recutting or refinishing" to develop integrated shows that provide "an action piece (which hooks the audience), a lyrical piece (which develops more emotion), and a think piece (which provokes thought on the part of the audience)" (Langley 2001). Considering that Langley's interview is offered on a website amidst options to read on show related topics such as, *COPS SHOP*, *DUMB CRIMINALS*, *COP OF THE WEEK*, and *VIDEO PREVIEWS*, Seagal's (1993) interpretation of a profit-oriented editing process seems to be on target. [end page 172]

Just how "real" reality television is has become a new and engaging vein of media research. But just how real the effects of watching television are has been a matter of scholarly analysis and contention since about the beginning of television itself. For the past 25 to 30 years the dominant perspective has been that of "cultural indicators and cultivation." This perspective suggests that what people regularly watch on TV affects their perception of the world (the reality) in which they live (Signorielli and Morgan 1990; Gerbner 1994; Ettema and Whitney 1994).

As noted, violence and crime are common elements of prime time television that, when repeatedly seen, may affect a viewer's sense of the world. The most prominent examination and explanation put forth about the impact of frequent television viewing comes from George Gerbner (1994). Over the past 25 years Gerbner (1994) has conducted extensive research (cultural indicators studies) on the topic and has concluded that the major consequence of extensive exposure to violent crime programming is the "mean world syndrome." He suggests that a steady visual diet of intense situations, especially when they are promoted as real, can instill in avid television viewers a sense of danger, threat, and fear. Thereby, viewers are placed in a politically exploitable position where information is a scarce resource, television their security supplier, and the police their protection on television and in reality (Gerbner 1994). On Gerbner's video *The Killing Screens* (1994), he uses a single program clip to demonstrate television's exploitation of the "war on crime and drugs" – the program clip is a scene snippet from *COPS*.

Signorielli and Morgan (1990) also recognize and research the connection between television and those who view it. Calling the examination process "cultivation analysis," Signorielli and Morgan (and Gerbner, too) are concerned with "long-term, cumulative consequences of exposure to an essentially repetitive and stable system of messages, not immediate short-term responses or individual interpretations" (Signorielli and Morgan 1990:18). And although these aforementioned researchers realize that the mediation of messages, meaning, construct, and context between television and the viewer is a reciprocal relationship, television typically takes the form of an

independent variable in their studies ([Signorielli and Morgan 1990](#); [Lewis 1991](#); [Gerbner 1994](#); [Ettema and Whitney 1994](#)).

Rarely has television taken the role of dependent variable, and rarer still is the examination of a single television show as a delineation of viewers' concerns ([Fiske 1987](#); [Lewis 1991](#)). Road-testing these research rarities is what John Fiske (1987) and Justin Lewis (1990) request. This study responds to that request. Both Fiske and Lewis acknowledge that the television audience consists of socially produced viewers who work the remote control within the web of their own social interests. More specifically, Fiske (1987:83) suggests that viewers scan for programs that provide them the "textual space" to mediate between who they are, what they see, and the way they interpret program content. This paper adopts Fiske's perspective and examines viewer reaction and response to the reality police program *COPS* as interactive reflections of their social selves and interests. [end page 173]

The data gathered to examine Fiske's (1987) perspective suits this study but at the same time exhibits limitations. For instance, time constraints narrowed the episode selection process and respondent recruitment. The sample is relatively small at 121 and the respondents were volunteers and primarily undergraduate Justice Studies majors. Also, no sizeable comparative group of non-Justice Studies students was captured in the voluntary sample nor was one actively solicited. Nevertheless, the honed interests of Justice Studies majors makes them apt and instructive subjects for studying the reality of televised *COPS*.

## METHODS

During the approximate two-month time span between 9/14/96 and 11/20/96, the author watched and videotaped 45 episodes (about 22.5 hours) of *COPS*, including the 1996 season episodes and those re-aired on a nightly basis as program reruns. A single episode was selected and edited to omit commercial advertisements. Episode selection was based on the extent to which the scenarios shown were police calls that corresponded closely to those issues most frequently represented on reality police programs "crime, drugs, violence, and imprisonment" ([Andersen 1995:179](#)). Moreover, the episode was considered a fair representation of the program's typical combination sequencing, described by John Langley (2001) the executive producer and creator of *COPS* as, "an action piece, a lyrical piece, and a think piece."

Specifically, the 10/15/96 (Tempe, AZ: KSAZ 10) episode includes: a) a drug/buy bust with a physical take down scene, b) a stabbing call that is also a domestic violence situation in which both partners have AIDS, and c) a shooting call in which the youthful minority victim ironically turns out to be the offender who winds up behind bars in the show's final scene. The episode also contains d) a roll call scene in which the increasing threat of violence is highlighted at length.

The data reported here were collected from 117 [Arizona State University](#) undergraduate students enrolled in various [Justice Studies](#) courses during the spring 1997 academic semester. Student participation in the project was voluntary, anonymous, and approved by the University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at Arizona State University. However, an extra-credit option was offered as inducement for participation. Of the 117 students who took part in the study, 75.2% (n=88) were Caucasian, 11.1% (n=13) Hispanic, 5.1% (n=6) Asian, 4.3% (n=5) African American, 2.6% (n=3) Native American, and 1.7% (n=2) other minorities. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 51, with a mean age of 23.6 years. The number of males (n=59) and females (n=58) in the sample was about equal. Additionally, at the time of the study 90.6% (n=106) of the participants indicated that Justice Studies was their current or intended college major.



Demographic characteristics for the Justice Studies undergraduate population were also obtained from the College of Public Programs at Arizona State University (Office of Institutional Analysis 1996). At the time, there were 841 undergraduate students in the program, 55.9% (n=470) male and 44.1% female (n=371). The racial distribution included: 70.6% (n=594) Caucasians, 15.2% (n=128) Hispanic Americans, [end page 174] 4.6% (n=39) African Americans, and 2% (n=16) other minorities. In regards to race and gender, the study sample of volunteers was representative of the Justice Studies population from which it was solicited.

An information letter and two self-administered survey questionnaires were given to all students taking part in the study. The first survey was administered prior to the subjects' viewing of the twenty-minute episode of *COPS*, and the second survey was completed immediately following the video presentation. Each respondent's individual surveys were then stapled together in order to link the pre/post data. In addition to the questionnaires and video presentation, 35 students also took part in five separate focus group sessions, with seven students taking part in each session. These focus group sessions were conducted immediately following completion of the second questionnaire. Selection of focus group participants was based on volunteering in advance and showing up at an agreed upon session. In the case of surplus focus group volunteers, selection rested upon my purposive attempt to capture quotes from an age, race, and gender range of different people. In all, 19 men and 16 women took part in the focus group sessions. Of the participants, 29 were Caucasian, 2 Hispanic American, 2 African American and 2 of Asian descent.

Four of the questionnaire and video sequences, as well as five of the focus group sessions, were conducted in a large, lecture-style classroom on the Arizona State University campus. Five additional sequences were conducted in a smaller conference room in the Justice Studies department, accommodating no more than five students per session.

## MODEL AND MODEL VARIABLES

A path model, incorporating nine variables reflecting the findings previously discussed in the literature review, was constructed, making satisfaction with the *COPS* program the dependent variable. Questions used to operationalize variables were primarily seven-point, Likert-type scale items. Cronbach's alpha was used to estimate general scale reliability as well as the internal consistency of each scale's underlying construct. Still, it should be noted that neither scale construction nor estimates of scale reliability are perfectible measures (Carmines and Zeller 1979; Kaplan and Saccuzzo 1982). In addition to scales, there were also two yes/no questions, one open-ended and one multiple-choice question, used as well. A list of the variables and the questions used to define them follows.

*COPS*. The dependent variable was constructed using a five-item index to gauge *viewer satisfaction with the COPS television program*. The item questions were adapted from Schlesinger, et al.'s (1992) *Women Viewing Violence (WVV)* questionnaire. Specifically, respondents were asked to rate their responses to the five questions on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 corresponding to a response of "not at all" and 7 being equivalent to a response of "very much." The questions included in the *COPS* index (post survey) were: [end page 175]

- (1) "How important do you think *COPS* is as a television program?"
- (2) "Overall, how realistic do you think the scenarios shown were?"
- (3) "Overall, how entertaining did you find these scenarios?"
- (4) "Overall, how seriously did you take the scenarios shown?"
- (5) "Overall, how exciting do you think these scenarios were?"

Cronbach's alpha for the *COPS* index was .81.

*WATCH*. This model variable pertained to how often the respondent watched the *COPS* television program. Answer options to this single item question were: "several times a week," "once a week," "occasionally (once or twice a month)," "rarely (a few times a year)," and "never" (pre survey).

*VIOLENT*. A single item question from Schlesinger, et al.'s (1992) *WVV* study was adapted to explore viewer estimates of the episode's violence. Respondents were asked, "Overall, how violent do you think these scenarios were?" Their answer selection ranged from 1 to 7, with 1 being "not at all violent" and 7 being "very violent" (post survey).

*POLICING*. A four-item index was utilized to measure respondent perception of the police. Index questions were adapted from Bielby and Berk's (1981) *Criminal Justice Evaluation* report. Respondents were asked to indicate their response on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 7 being "strongly agree," for each of the following statements and questions (pre survey):

- (1) "The police are too willing to use force and violence."
- (2) "Some people say the police frisk or search people without good reason. Do you agree that this happens to people in your neighborhood?"
- (3) "Some people say the police don't show respect for people or they use insulting language. Do you agree that this happens to people in your neighborhood?"
- (4) "Some people say the police rough people up unnecessarily when they are arresting them or afterwards. Do you agree that this happens in your neighborhood?"

Cronbach's alpha for the Policing index was .82.

*FEAR*. A seven-item index measured respondent fear of crime. Items used in the index were adapted from the 1993 *Gallup Poll*. Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being "never" and 7 being "very frequently," how often they themselves worried about each of the following things (pre survey):

- (1) "Getting murdered"
- (2) "Getting mugged"
- (3) "Getting beaten up, knifed or shot" **[end page 176]**
- (4) "Yourself getting sexually assaulted or raped"
- (5) "Someone in your family getting sexually assaulted or raped"
- (6) "Being attacked while driving your car"
- (7) "Your home being burglarized when you are there"

Cronbach's index alpha was .78.

*V-P and V-NP*. To examine the direct and indirect effects of property (*V-P*) and non-property (*V-NP*) crime victimization within the hypothesized model, respondents were asked two separate "yes or no" questions (pre survey). They were asked "Have you ever been victimized by a property crime?" and "Have you ever been victimized by a non-property crime?". A reply of "no" was coded as 0 and "yes" was coded as 1.

*GENDER*. Respondents were asked to check either "male" or "female" in response to the question item asking, "What is your gender?" (pre survey). The responses were coded as male 0 and female 1.

*RACE*. Respondents were allowed to write in their response to the question "What is your race/ethnic origin?" (pre survey). The responses received were then collapsed into six categories corresponding to those used by the College of Public Programs at Arizona State University. Those categories include: Caucasians, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, American Indians, and other minorities. However, for the purposes of model analysis the race variable was dichotomized with Caucasian coded as 0 and non-Caucasian coded as 1.

## ANALYSIS

[Figure 1](#) shows the hypothesized path model positioning of the variables described above. This model was constructed to test Fiske's theory that television viewers as social "readers will only produce meanings from, and find pleasure in, a television program if it allows for . . . articulation of their interests" (Fiske 1987:83). According to this interactive reception structure, the model's structure follows suit in proposing that the following paths would be statistically significant based upon the review of the literature. More specifically, the arrowhead path lines in [Figure 1](#) are recursively structured from: 1) *GENDER* (female coded as 1) to *FEAR* of crime (Schlesinger, et al. 1992), 2) *RACE* (non-Caucasian coded as 1) to *POLICING* (Oliver 1994; Oliver and Armstrong 1999), 3) *V-NP* and *V-P* to *FEAR* of crime and *POLICING* (Schlesinger, et al. 1992) 4) *POLICING* to *WATCH* (Fiske 1987), 5) *FEAR* of crime to *WATCH* and *VIOLENT* (Fiske 1987), 6) *WATCH* to satisfaction with *COPS* (Signorielli and Morgan 1990; Gerbner 1994; Fiske 1987), and 7) *VIOLENT* to satisfaction with *COPS* (Schlesinger et al. 1992; Danielson et al 1996).

This model was examined using path analysis. Path analysis is a means for empirically measuring the effects of sequential and compounding relationships among operationalized variables in a theoretical model. The LISREL 8.14 program was used to estimate and measure the hypothesized structuring of paths reflected in [Figure 1](#). [end page 177] LISREL uses the maximum likelihood method and, hence, assumes that the data are multivariate, normally distributed, and without non-random missing data.

The initial model did not fit the data very well. The chi-square with 18 degrees of freedom was 29.01 ( $p=0.047$ ) and the goodness of fit index (GFI) was 0.95. This indicates that the data were unlikely to be generated by the relationships reflected in [Figure 1](#). Based upon an examination of the modification indices produced in the LISREL output, two paths in the initial model were fixed and one path was freed. The two paths that were fixed (i.e. deleted) from the model were those from *V-NP* (Victim of Non-Property Crime) and *V-P* (Victim of Property Crime) to *POLICING*. The path that was freed was the path from *GENDER* to *VIOLENT*. This decision appeared theoretically sound and was statistically justified. Re-estimating the derived path model featured in [Figure 2](#) found the model meaningful. This resulting path model lends support to Fiske's (1987) and Lewis's (1991) notions about viewers' personal characteristics and attitudes mediating a social stake and satisfaction in the television program content they select. [Figure 2](#) also renders all of the direct path coefficients produced from the model estimation procedures. Those paths that were significant (using the critical z-statistic value 1.96) are designated with an asterisk.

To test the model's overall significance, the chi-square index and the GFI were again examined. These goodness of fit statistics for the derived model are listed at the bottom of [Figure 2](#). The chi-square is small at 23.71 with 20 degrees of freedom and non-significant ( $p=0.26$ ). The GFI is 0.96. Overall, the theoretical underpinnings of the model as well as the signs and values of the path



coefficients reveal a model that conforms well to the reality of the data.

Complementing the path analytic model were several themes that emerged during the focus group discussions. Those themes most directly related to the issues of who watches *COPS*, why they watch, and how satisfied they are with the program are highlighted below. Readers are reminded that the sample for this study consists of undergraduate Justice Studies majors, whose chosen field of study indicates a probable, pre-existing high level of interest in the situation scenarios *COPS* covers. Although there is no comparative control group, the sample purposively suits this paper's examination of the vested social interests viewers bring to the television screen.

Crosscutting most of the groups was the theme that those who watch the program are physically and socially removed from what they are shown on the show. This theme suggests that those who watch are typically white working to middle class Americans, wishing to glimpse the lives of the lower class as well as the crimes they commit. The following quote depicts the certainty with which focus group participants classified the "average *COPS* viewer":

I'm sure a lot of them are probably, you know, John Factory Worker or something, which their exciting thing is that they got like a free donut from the candy machine, or something like that. That's their excitement for the day, and they come home and they can turn it off. And even though it's somebody else's [end page 178] reality, it's not theirs and they can sit back and watch it, and you know, get a little bit of adrenaline running through their veins (Eric, 20 year old, Caucasian male).

Following this theme, most focus group participants voiced a concern that what the average viewer was seeing was a censored reality – devoid of white-collar crime, arrests of upper class people, and a police force commissioned to deal with such prime time rarities. When asked if the program was realistic, many students referenced their own experience and understanding of crime and law enforcement, acknowledging that geography and class status play a part in the level and type of crime detection featured on the show. For instance, one student summed up the unrealistic nature of the program saying that:

Depending on the neighborhood, police use different tactics, different attitudes and different perceptions of people in different neighborhoods. An officer in South Phoenix is not going to be the same, have the same persona and the same attitude, when he pulls someone over if he were in North Phoenix. It's two totally different areas; I think in that sense it's not reality. And then . . . look at the areas and the people that are always on these shows, lower to middle income, you never see anyone from like a Paradise Valley-type neighborhood. I'm not saying that they don't do crime, you know, but you say that this is *COPS*, you say this is reality, reality whatever, but not all crime happens on the street (Chris, 27 year old, African American male).

Heightened awareness of law enforcement and crime permeation of all social classes pinpoints the critical and engaged perspective of this sample of Justice Studies students.

Still, the show is popular and has high ratings. Most of the respondents agreed that the general public and at least some of them watch the show for its violent content. This voyeuristic appeal is aptly epitomized below:

I think people watch it for violence, entertainment and violence. I mean it's just real violence. It's not like the movies, it's somewhere that you've either been, or know what's happening there and you see the violence. And I think that's why people watch it. It's reality violence (David, 30 year old, Caucasian male).

Similarly, the respondents recognized their own "rubberneck" (Tiffany, 21 year old, Caucasian female) interests in the program's promotion of the unfamiliar, the other. Synopsizing this curiosity, one woman said:

I think people are always interested in what the criminal justice system is doing, what the cops are doing, and so I think that grabs peoples' attention, just like, you know, with the O.J. trial and all that stuff. People were attracted to it, because that's something that they're not familiar with but they're interested in; there always seems to be an interest in crime. And same as when you are driving down the road and there is an accident, what do you do? You look (Shelly, 25 year old, Caucasian female). **[end page 179]**

Likening the reality of *COPS* to a roadside accident does not singly explain why people watch the program, but it may represent their intersection of social concerns converging on a televised street of life.

The majority of the respondents said that the program did not affect either their fear of crime or their trust level of others. On the contrary, most respondents resounded a concern corresponding to the following quote:

I think that's a problem with the show . . . it distances you. Because I think, oh, this is there but I am here, and I live in this neighborhood, so it's not going to happen to me . . . It makes me not fear crime like I probably should, like anybody should . . . unless I go in those neighborhoods (Marty, 23 year old, Caucasian female).

This diminished fear of crime and heightened sense of social distance might be linked to what the respondents consider to be the coming prospects of reality crime programming.

When asked what they thought lies beyond reality television, the majority of respondents agreed that televised executions were the next step, positing that they probably would be on pay-per-view soon. Pressing toward more violence and crime in the present tense, one respondent described what he thought the next reality television series would be:

Maybe a show where they follow the criminals around; they could call it *CROOKS*, coming even closer to the actual crime (Eric, 26 year old, Caucasian male).

Whether or not *CROOKS* ever becomes a reality, *COPS* is a real program in the here and now, and people have diverse thoughts about the show, its content, and what they do and do not like about it. The focus group discussions reveal that *COPS* is of social interest, it has vested interests, and viewers mediate their own interests to and from it.

## CONCLUSION

Survey and focus group data collected for this study supplement each other as they each offer insight into the Fiske-based theoretical model which structures people and their socially honed interests as prior to satisfaction with a particular television program. Looking specifically at the *COPS* program, I found that the personal variables of *RACE*, *GENDER*, and victimization of a non-property (*V-NP*) crime had varying, but statistically significant direct and indirect effects on viewers' attitudes toward *POLICING*, their *FEAR* of crime, how often they watched the *COPS* program, and how *VIOLENT* they perceived the program content to be. Similarly, frequency of viewing and perception of violence affected their satisfaction with the study episode and the program overall. [end page 180]

Focus group data shored up some pathways of the model, revealing that even in discussion format respondents acknowledged that the violent content of the program was a meaningful attraction factor. Most of the discussants said that the program did not affect their fear of crime but rather desensitized them to violence and attributed crime to neighborhoods and social classes of which they were not a part. Thus, without leaving the safety of their living room their curiosity to see other walks of life could be satisfied.

Empirical findings and inferences, however, must be considered in light of the fact that the sample consisted mainly of undergraduate Justice Studies majors. The nature of their courses, career aspirations, and interests perhaps make them more aware of the realities of crime and law enforcement. Still, this interest is also exactly what Fiske (1987) suggests viewers employ in mediating what they see on the television screen, thus making students of Justice Studies befitting subjects for the purposes of studying the reality of televised *COPS*.

Future research might incorporate a comparative control group of non-Justice Studies majors to contrast results. The results of that study might lead to a larger, more representative sample of the American public for purposes of exploring reasons people choose to watch reality television. Also, a more elaborate causal model including variables like education, place of residence, and a satisfaction scale concerning more than one program might provide insight into the social factors that bring people to watch small screen reality.

The mediation of meaning between the viewer and the television screen revealed throughout this study is a crucial point to consider. Fiske (1987) and Lewis (1991) are correct in requesting audience research, which examines more than television's influence, because to recognize the impact of viewer interactive reception in the social processing of meaning is to recognize the force and the reality of the social viewer.

## ENDNOTE

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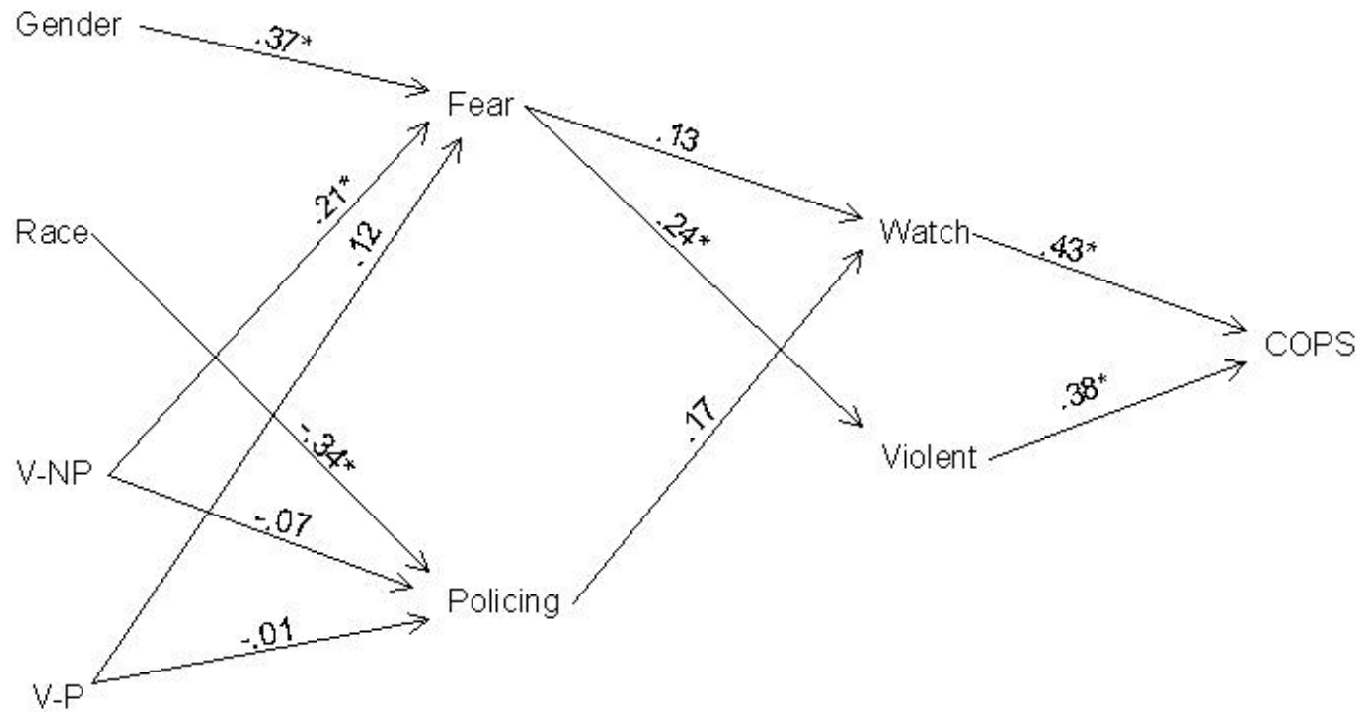
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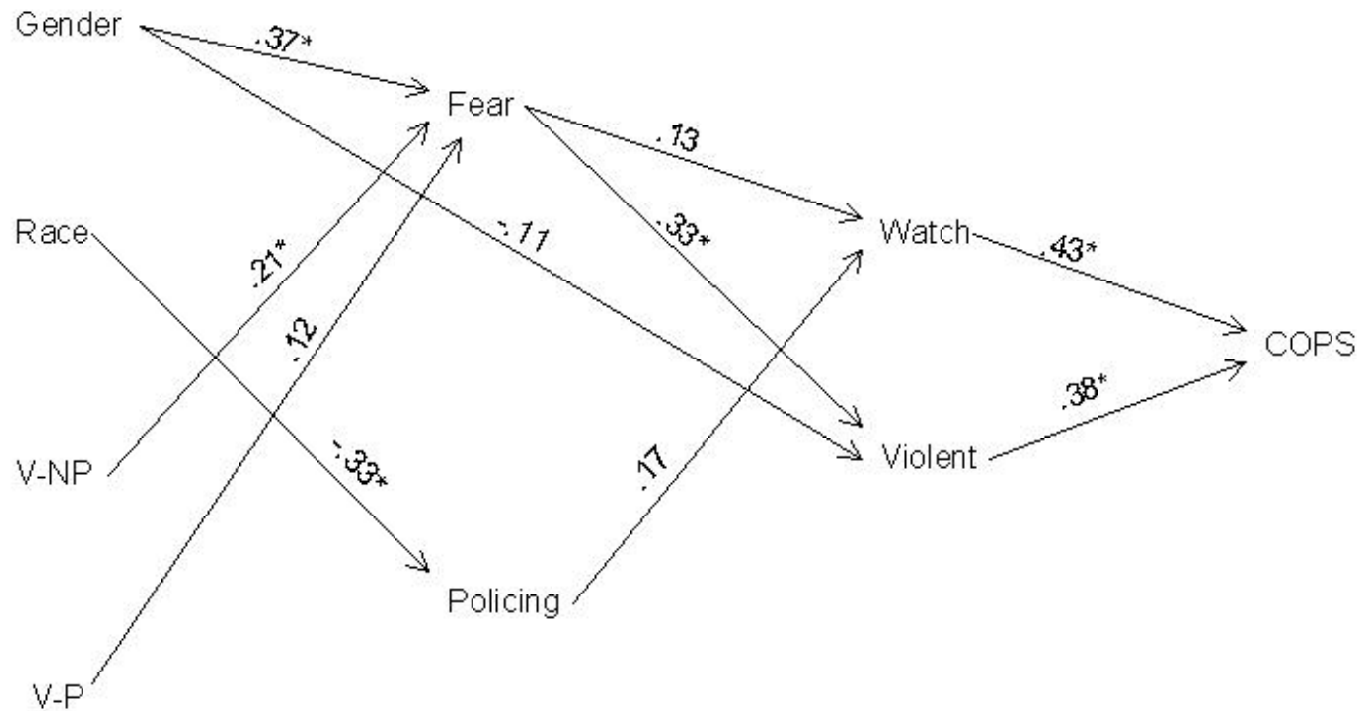


Figure 1. The Initial Interpretative Reception Path Model Of Viewer Level Of Satisfaction With COPS



\* Designates a sig level  $\leq .05$  Chi-square with 18df=29.09 (P=0.047) GFI=0.95

Figure 2. The Derived Interpretative Reception Path Model Of Viewer Level Of Satisfaction With COPS



\* Designates a sig level  $\leq .05$  Chi-square with 20df=23.71 (P=0.26) GFI=0.96