

Mass-media, climate of opinion and subjective well-being

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Abstract

Researches about the relation between media exposure and psychological well-being were conducted in two different study areas.

- In media sociology, mass-media is considered a mediator between the fulfillment of needs and life satisfaction. Drawing from the escapism function of media, Edgar Morin (1962) inferred that the purpose of mass culture was to create an (illusory) happiness of individuals.
- On the other side, the quality of life researchers took into account psychological variables like materialism (Sirgy, Lee & al., 1998).



Abstract

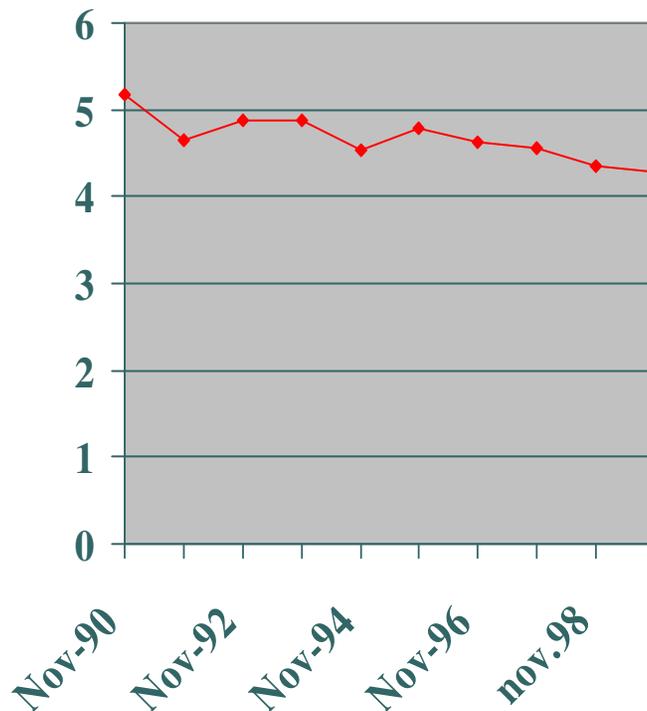
The present paper's purpose is to analyze the relationship between media and subjective well-being from a sociological perspective. Building upon the paradigms of climate of opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1987) and public mood (Rahn, Kreoger & Kite, 1996), I tried to highlight different aspects of the relationship between media and subjective well-being.



Subjective well-being

- Is a measure of the individual and societal output
- Has two levels: global (measured by indicators like *happiness* or *life satisfaction*) and sectorial satisfaction indicators (satisfaction with job, family, political system)
- Is an *individual* phenomena with *collective* determinants:
 - socio-demographical
 - economical
 - political, etc.

Why use the subjective well-being approach ?



- Subjective well-being is relatively stable in time (See left: Life satisfaction in Romania (1990-1999), ICCV Diagnosis of Quality of Life)
- The variation of the subjective well-being is correlated with other societal indicators
- It reflects a combination of objective & subjective factors



Structure of subjective well-being.

- Cognitive dimension: life satisfaction
 - measured with life satisfaction scales
- Hedonic dimension: general affect
 - has two *independent* components: negative and positive affect

FOR MORE INFO...

Bradburn (1969), Diener (1994), Veenhoven (1993)



Measures of subjective well-being

- Cognitive dimension: life satisfaction scales
- Hedonic dimension: Affect Balance scale (Bradburn, 1969), etc.



TV viewing and life satisfaction: a summary of findings

- controversial relationship
- both causal effects demonstrated



Main findings in literature (positive)

- light mass-media attendance has a relaxing effect which can contribute to an increased life satisfaction.
- television can increase the time that family members spend together, thus increasing quality of family life.

SEE ALSO:

(Kubey & Csikszentmihaly, 1990)



Main findings in literature (negative)

- mass-media attendance has a negative correlation with life satisfaction (heavy TV viewers are more unsatisfied).
- the effect is heavier in an elderly sample.

SEE ALSO:

(Morgan 1984) (Espe & Seiwert 1987) (Sirgy & al. 1998a)



Explanatory models (1)

Materialism.

- TV viewing induce materialist attitudes. People do social comparisons with average other (projection extracted from TV images - see cultivation hypothesis), thus the perceived of their own quality of life is lower.

SEE ALSO:

(Sirgy & al., 1998a) (Sirgy & al., 1998b)



Explanatory models (2)

The media uses.

- People with low subjective well-being watch more TV in search of gratification.
- But higher levels of TV viewing are less rewarding.

See also:

(Espe & Seiwert 1987)



Unexplored causal links

- Relationship between mass-media, public mood, and subjective well-being.
- A more sociological perspective.
- Cultivation, agenda setting, climate of opinion theories implied.



Climate of opinion

- Noelle-Neumann (1974) introduced the concept together with her theory of the Spiral of silence.
- In the author's view, individuals are making assumptions and observations about the “social environment”, which is perceived directly and personally , or through the media.



Climate of opinion

- The expressing of peoples attitudes is influenced by the perception of the climate of opinion, mainly because of the people's fear of isolation. When people feel that they belong to the majority, they will speak, when not, they will keep the silence.
- This is the main focus of the critics of the theory. They challenge the idea that public opinion is our "social skin", that we can neither leave nor escape. (Scheufele & Moy 2000)



Climate of opinion as a social indicator

- Noelle-Neumann goes further the public opinion field debate, pushing the concept of “climate of opinion” in the quality of life research.
- She gives an argument for why we can consider climate of opinion as a social indicator.
- She also elaborate the methodology of measuring this construct (Noelle-Neumann 1988).



Climate of opinion as a social indicator

- This is done by asking people to evaluate their psychological well-being (life satisfaction, stress, etc.) and the psychological well-being of others.
- The approach was rather new and controversial, because it claims to add the perception of others subjective feelings to the domain of social indicators, when, in general, this kind of subjective appreciation of subjective matters is not preferred.



Climate of opinion as a social indicator

- I reproduced here (see right) the results presented by Noelle-Neumann.
- The results shows an obvious discrepancy between the report of own satisfaction and the perception of the satisfaction of others.

Example:

- 1. Do you have the impression that most people in the Federal Republic are satisfied with their live generally speaking or they are not so satisfied ?*
- 2. Would you say that you are satisfied with your life generally speaking or are you not so satisfied ?*

| | <i>Most people %</i> | <i>Own sat. with life %</i> |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>Satisfied with life</i> | 47 | 79 |
| <i>Not so satisfied</i> | 40 | 21 |
| <i>Undecided</i> | 13 | <i>less than 0.5 %</i> |

Source: Allensbach Archives, August 1982

(Noelle-Neumann 1988)



The self-favoring bias

- The perception bias in the estimation of the life satisfaction preoccupied me since 1999. I reproduced the relation in several surveys (Baltatescu, 1999)
- Peoples are reporting a higher life satisfaction than the estimated life satisfaction of an average people of their own country.



The self-favoring bias

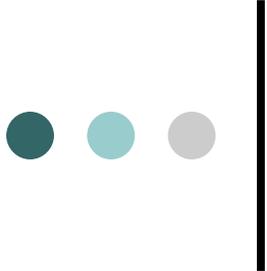
- The findings are consistent with other forms of “self-favoring biases” (Hoorens 1995) like:
 - unrealistic optimism
 - positive illusion
 - third-persons effect.



The backward sloping curve of life satisfaction

A form of “self-favoring bias” is the “backward sloping curve of life satisfaction” (Băltătescu, 1999)

This is obtained by asking how satisfied with life think they are the members of their family, their relatives, neighbors, peoples from their town and peoples from their countries.



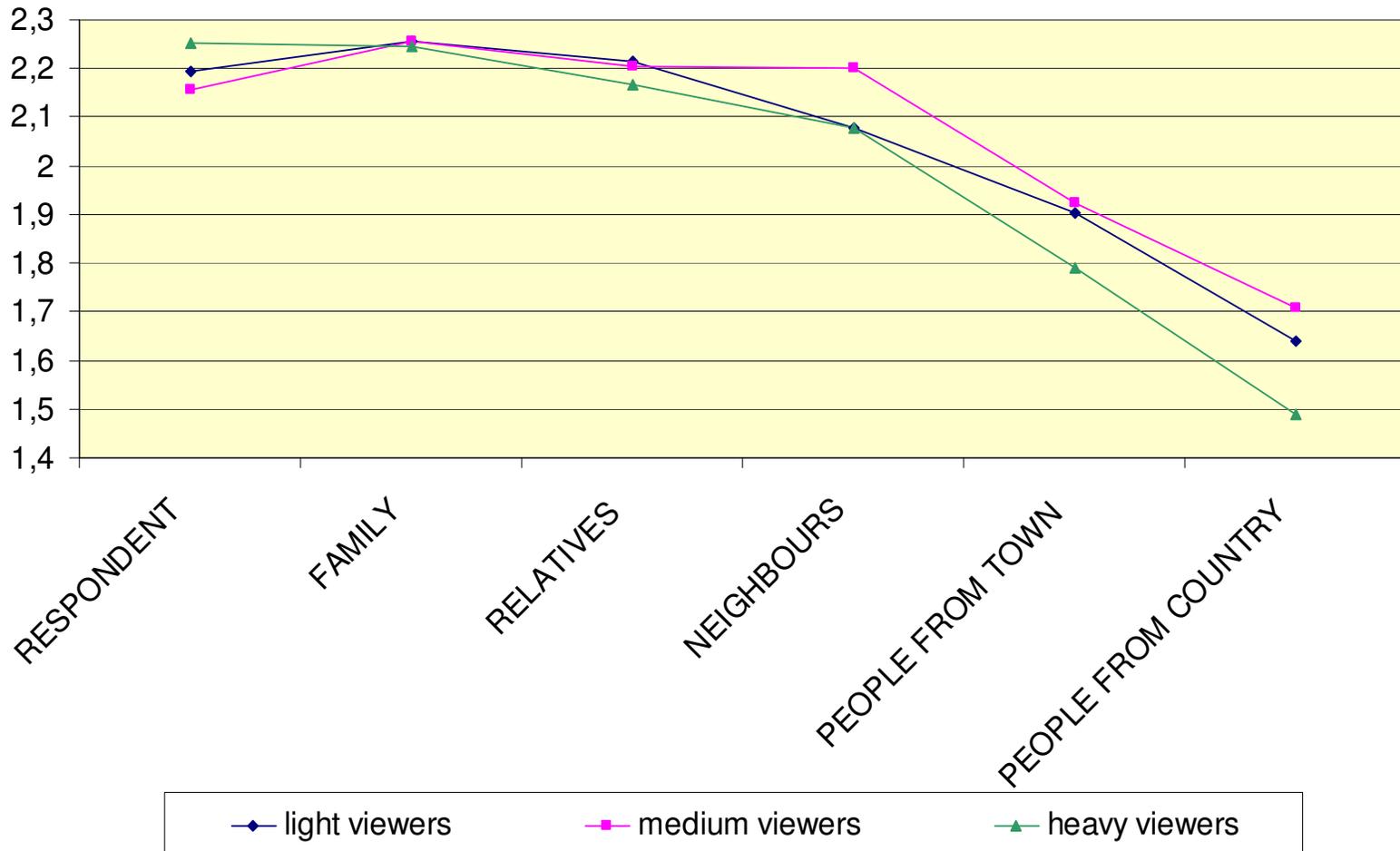
The backward sloping curve of life satisfaction

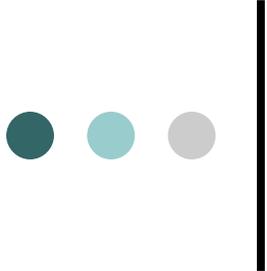
- The results are showing that the bias is influenced, among other variables, by the “psychological distance”: the “abstract” people from town and country is judged to be more unhappy than the subject itself. The closer peoples are, the more their satisfaction with life is judged positively.
- The regularity take the form of a backward sloping curve (see next slide).



The backward sloping curve of life satisfaction

How satisfied are you/how satisfied do you think are ... with your/their lives?





The media influence on the backward sloping curve

General hypothesis: The shape of the backward sloping curve is influenced by the media attendance.

Working hypotheses:

1. The heavy TV viewers are more inclined to consider that peoples of higher psychological distance (peoples from country, peoples from town) are more likely to express dissatisfaction with their lives.
2. There is no difference between the three types of TV viewer's perceptions of other's satisfaction with life, because this kind of perception is not through the media.



Method

Sample size: 885 subjects

Level: county

Sample: random, stratified



Testing the theory

Working hypothesis 1:

The difference between the mean of *heavy* and *light* TV viewers concerning the answers to the question “How satisfied with their lives do you think the peoples from your town are?” is significant ($t=2,482$, corresponding with the probability level $p=0.013$). But the difference between the mean of same variables measured for medium viewers and light viewers, and medium viewers and light viewers, is nonsignificant at 0.05 level.



Testing the theory

Working hypothesis 1:

The mean of the answers “How satisfied with their lives do you think the peoples from your country are?” of the *heavy* TV viewers is significantly different from the mean of *medium* (2,671, significant for the probability level $p=0.01$) and *light* (3,475, significant for the probability level $p=0.01$) TV viewers. The difference between the mean of same variables measured for *medium* and *light* viewers, is nonsignificant at 0.05 level.



Testing the theory

Working hypothesis 2:

The differences between the mean of answers of the three groups of *heavy*, *medium* and *light* TV viewers to the questions “How satisfied with their lives do you think the members of your family/ your relatives/your neighbors are?” are non-significant, as shows the following table.

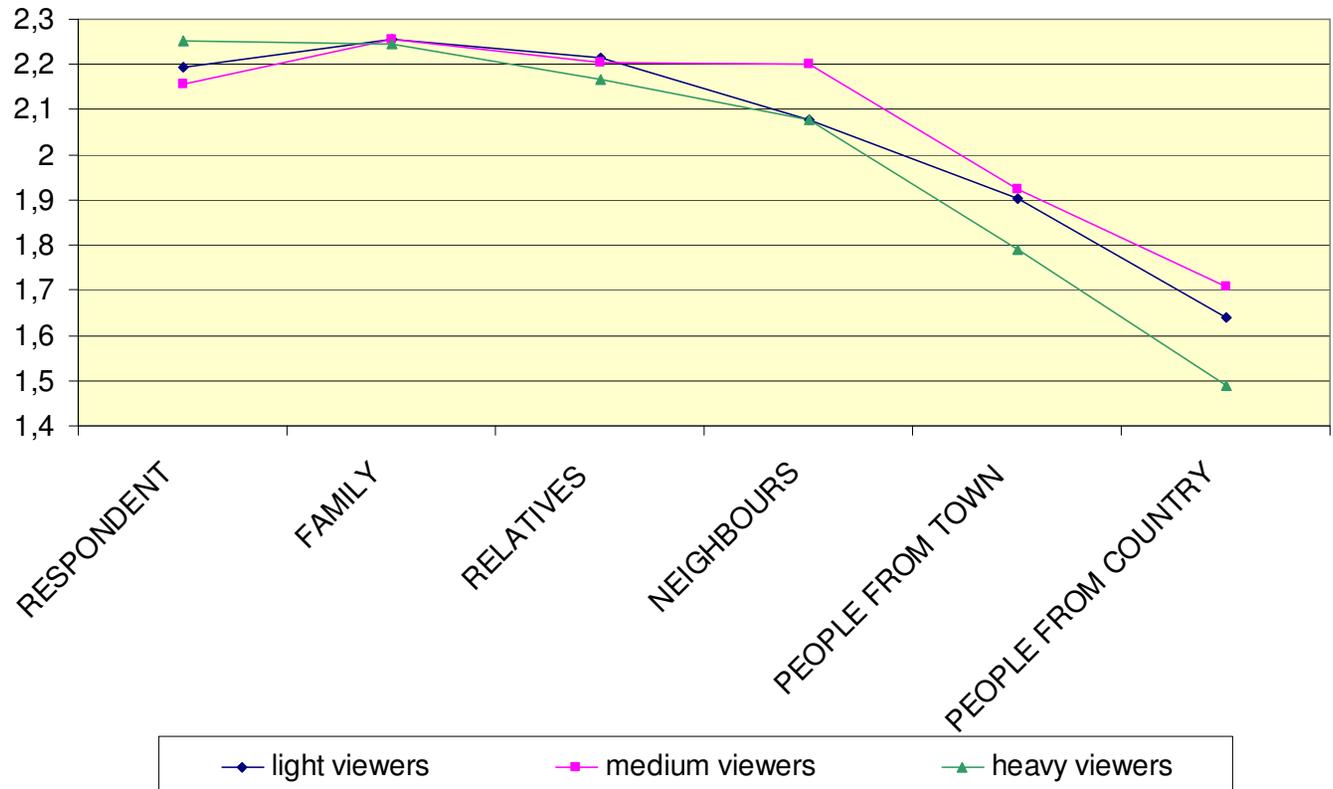
| | SUBIECT | | MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY | | RELATIVES | | NEIGHBOURS | |
|-----------------------------------|---------|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------|-------------------|------------|---------------------|
| | N | Mean | N | Mean | N | Mean | N | Mean |
| light viewers | 332 | 2,21 | 333 | 2,28 | 261 | 2,26 | 228 | 2,12 |
| medium viewers | 237 | 2,12 | 230 | 2,22 | 194 | 2,14 | 170 | 2,18 |
| heavy viewers | 294 | 2,27 | 291 | 2,26 | 246 | 2,17 | 203 | 2,08 |
| F-test for the global differences | | F=2,68, p=0,69 | | F=0,375 p=0,687 | | F=1.44 p=0,238 | | F=0,775, p=0,461 |



Media influence on backward sloping curve of life satisfaction

For heavy TV viewers, the effect is powerful

How satisfied are you/how satisfied do you think are ... with your/their lives?





Discussion

When people are asked to evaluate their life satisfaction, and the relevant group's life satisfaction (members of the family, relatives, neighbors, people from town, people from country), the values obtained decreases with psychological distance: the more distanced are the peoples, the less are judged to be happy.

This regularity takes the form of a curve, which I called "the backward-sloping curve of life satisfaction".



Discussion

We presumed higher TV attendance will be associated with a more negative evaluation of satisfaction of peoples from the town/country.

On the contrary, we supposed high TV attendance will not be associated with a different perception of life satisfaction of peoples from closer psycho-logical distance, because in their cases the judgement is not mediated.



Discussion

Both hypotheses were partially confirmed:

- Heavy TV viewers were found to judge less favorably than medium or light TV viewers the life satisfaction of peoples from their town or country.
- This association was not observed in the case of the perception of peoples from immediate psychological distance (family, neighbors, relatives), and also no difference was observed between light and medium viewers.



Discussion

The results seems to be in accordance with the theory of “climate of opinion” which implies that peoples actively scan their environment.

Mass media is intervening here giving the opportunity to evaluate the “larger social environment”, consisting of peoples from greater distances.



Discussion

Peoples with higher media attendance are supposed to be more influenced by the media images. Because the media image on peoples life conditions and events is rather negative, peoples relying on the media image will be inclined to judge more negatively the life satisfaction of their compatriots.



Discussion

- No significant differences were found between the life satisfaction of light, medium and heavy viewers. This seems to contradict the previous findings by Morgan (1984), Espe & Seiwert (1987), Sirgy & al. (1998a).



Conclusions

- The backward sloping curve of subjective well-being, a self serving bias on evaluation of other subjective well-being (Bălțătescu, 1999), was found to be mediated by media attendance, as heavy TV viewers were found to judge less favorably than medium or light viewers the life satisfaction of peoples from their town or country.
- As, typically, media presents images of catastrophes, crimes, and so on, those relying on it for an assessment of other peoples lives will be more inclined to judge their subjective well-being as lower.
- This seem to confirm the hypothesis about role of the media on evaluation of social environment.



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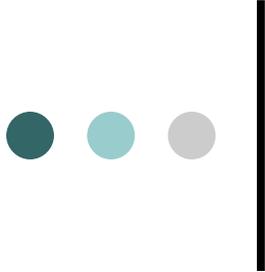
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