

Fear talk(s): Mapping audiences' emotional responses to film and television

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Sharing Experience
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PhD Research Title



A cross-national and cross-generational
audience study of the nature and functions of
media-related *fears* and *anxieties*

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Background

- ✓ Perceived problem of a 'culture of fear'
(Glassner, 1999; Furedi, 2005)
- ✓ Media creating our 'symbolic environment',
influencing our perception of a dangerous
reality, a 'mean world'
(Gerbner et al., 1960s onwards)
- *Away* from 'effects' question and *towards*
an understanding of the complexities in the
relationship between 'fear' and the media

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Aims and objectives

- To qualitatively explore the role of the media
(film & TV) in relation to the nature and
functions of fears and anxieties in viewers'
lives
 - ✓ To draw out from people's talk the interpretive
frameworks through which different kinds of 'fear'
are articulated and made meaningful
 - ✓ Modalities, un/welcome (generational) fears,
connections to wider understandings of, and
actions within, the world
 - ✓ Media environments of Germany and UK (Wales)

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Material...



<http://www.dancewithshadows.com/uma/freedom-fear.asp>

- ✓ 4 German & 5 UK three-generational families (48 participants in total)
- ✓ Viewing diaries and open-ended questionnaires June–November 2005, May 2006
- ✓ 13 follow-up interviews in Germany, 19 in the UK (32 in total; partly individual, partly in groups, mainly face-to-face)

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Semi-structured interviews

- ✓ Open-ended questions based partly on viewing diaries/short questionnaires, and partly on existing literature
 - e.g. relationship between mediated reality and real life, media engagement, identification, etc.
- ✓ To 1) let participants talk in detail about fearful responses to particular programmes, and 2) let them explore the role of the media in their lives – e.g. (dis)likes, uses, pleasures –, their general emotional 'selves', and any relationship between the two.
- ✓ Issues often touched upon were crime drama, horror films, the news, and media violence

– though non of these had been 'prompted' in advance.

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Selection...

20 (out of 32) interviews:
10 from each country

Grandparents
Parents
Teenagers
'Aunts'
Parents and Teens

GERMANY
Family A **IV, XII, XIII**; Family B **II, V**;
Family C **VI, VII, VIII**; Family D **III, IX**

UNITED KINGDOM
Fam. A **XIV, XV, XVI**; Fam. B **X, XI**; Fam. C **IX**;
Fam. D **XVII, XIX**; Fam. E **XIII, XVIII**

Working Example:
UK Interview **XIV**

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UK Interview XIV

- ✓ Celia (45) and Edwin (47)
- ✓ Interview conducted in July 2006 at their home in Aberystwyth
- ✓ 1h 30min ⇔ 53 single-spaced pages

➤ Chose it for first systematic analysis because it was an *easy* one to start with: very participant-led, relaxed, very reflective... And I could easily identify a German cross-match for 'comparison'

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Interview Table: Categorising Emotion Talk

- ✓ Eleven *kinds* of emotion talk, of which four are overarching FEAR (emotion) categories:
 - (a) Pleasurable, (b) Unnerving, (c) Wholly to be avoided, (d) Mixed
- ✓ Seven moderating factors:
 - Reality/Fiction, Legitimacy Dimension, Media Critique, Media Literacy, Personal Experience, Time, Awareness, Coping Strategies
- ✓ Three main sections:
 - 'socio-psychological', 'socio-cultural', 'societal'

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Kinds of Emotion Talk	Subject Matters	Expressions	Moderating Factors
SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL			
<p>(1) Generic Fears: Participants' definitions of the kinds of fears and worries they see as part of their lives, definitions of their emotional selves</p> <p>Relatively static/universal, only sometimes (and temporarily) influenced (or heightened) by media experiences/impacts</p>	<p>'Phobias' (trains, tubes, flying, football matches, confined spaces, crowded places, drowning, pain) Fears for children (drugs)</p>	<p>my fears, my worries, my anxieties, frightened, worried, anxious, 'quite enjoy landing and take-off, hate the bit in between, it petrifies me', quite happy to...; 'you can't stand it, you just get stiff', 'you are a worrier', bloody panic attack, 'I'm a huge emotional person', 'I was a sensitive soul', 'it has worried me', 'tend not to think about it', 'I'm far more susceptible to things than you are', 'I cry at things, I cry at news', had to deal with it</p>	<p>Personal Experience (e.g. being a parent) Awareness Time Coping Strategies</p>
<p>(2) Life sentiments: Any talk which refers to the way participants feel within their environment and about their life situations as a whole</p> <p>Relatively static, undisputed</p>	<p>Aberystwyth as protected place, except for drug problem, world as a whole violent and destructive, London (and other cities) more dangerous than Aberystwyth Knife culture EastEnders</p>	<p>'we do live in this protected corner of the world', one of my biggest fears – drugs, but it's not in our culture, we haven't got those kinds of connections, 'but I know from school that there are kids who do it', knife culture: 'we're spoiled here', 'it is a decent place to be living', not that sort of crime here</p>	<p>Personal Experience (school, parenting)</p>

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SOCIO-CULTURAL			
<p>(3) Mediated Fears: Any talk in which participants make media experiences or memories responsible for the development or heightening of certain fears or worries</p> <p>Explicit or implicit, depending on the specificity to the media reference</p>	<p>News Footage on football crush Knife culture Flight 93 David Blane Traffic Cops Flying – terrorist threat</p>	<p>that triggered me, catalyst, stopped going to football matches for a while, scared me, 'I was swimming on that Sunday, I was thinking, oh, I, God, being, you know', 'scary to think you could encounter a drink-driver, any time you could end up being killed', 'there's been so much on the news lately about, and you do worry about, you could be a completely innocent bystander', 'it's happening all the time, isn't it?', Terrorist threat: makes you wary, does have that effect, 'as long as no other incidents happen-- you forget', the less you think about it, the less of an effect it has</p>	<p>Awareness Time Personal Experience</p>
<p>(4) Pleasurable Media Emotions: Welcome emotional responses to media material, including pleasurable fears</p> <p>Clear and static</p>	<p>Thrillers, some horror films (Friday 13th, Dracula--), [suspense] – Media/Audience change Coronation Street [funny] Love Island [funny] Lassie [heart-warming] Football viewing</p>	<p>horror/thriller: 'I've always liked the scary bits, but when you know it's not real', 'okay to derive pleasure', exciting, scary, suspense, adrenaline, enjoy being scared, startling, shock, <i>not</i> gratuitous, frightened, it hits you, makes you jump, build-up, tension, excellent, 'I talk through it', getting wound up, intense, 'it's more intense when it's not so graphic'; LI: 'don't take it seriously'; CS: funny, not so serious, not real in the same way; Lassie: 'I cried at Lassie, get quite emotional, football: anxious</p>	<p>Legitimacy Dimension Reality/Fiction Media Literacy Media Critique Coping Strategies</p>

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<p>(5) Unnerving Media Experiences: These media experiences are endured, either because they form part of real life and cannot be ignored, or because they are compelling viewing. They cannot be enjoyed in any true sense of the word.</p> <p>Clear and static</p>	<p>News Beverly Allitt Moors Murders Holby City Flight 93 9/11 Liverpool crush Northern Ireland Jamie Bulger Bradford</p>	<p>unnerved me, upset me, gave cause for concern, reality more scary than fiction, but 'some fiction does get to you', 'you feel it mirrors life', stayed with me, incredible, you feel desperate, has impact, has effect, you feel their horror, empathy, deeper thinking, knock-on effect, HC: did bother me, make you think, uneasy, made you wonder, moral dilemma, Flight 93: upsetting, unnerving, awful, put yourself in their position, made me cry: 9/11: 'everybody remembers those images', 'it will live with people for...'; Liverpool: awful, still horrid now, images stays with me; NI: barbaric, ashamed to be part of the human race; JB: shameful, to think that children could do that</p>	<p>Reality/Fiction Dimension Legitimacy Personal Experience (being a parent) Awareness</p>
<p>(6) Wholly to be Avoided Media Emotions: Such responses are characterised by participants' utter rejection of the media material, or by their emphasis on discontent.</p> <p>Clear and static, theoretically but not always practically avoided</p>	<p>EastEnders Pulp Fiction Freddy vs. Jason gratuitous violence swearing fist fighting reality, trivia, sex, violence</p>	<p>EE: 'all doom and gloom', dreadfully depressing, deep, far-fetched, bleak, grey: 'it's the violent thing... that I have real difficulty with', 'I hated Pulp Fiction', no storyline, 'all violence for violence sake', lasting impression, 'all I can remember is blood everywhere', incredible, 'stuck with me', 'I've never forgotten it, never, awful', horrid, ridiculous, over the top, truly horrific, don't like seeing it, I couldn't believe it</p>	<p>Media Critique Media Literacy</p>

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<p>(7) Mixed Feelings: Somewhere between pleasurable and unnerving, at times endured and at other times enjoyed</p> <p>Somewhat unrefined, though can become more refined throughout the conversation</p>	<p>David Blane [fascinating but horrific]</p>	<p>DB: 'found that very disturbing', 'quite entertaining', 'captivating, but horrid, horrific, scared me, stuck in our mind, 'did he really do that?', he did have us thinking', 'incredible, enjoyable programme, concern, disbelief, fear, anxiety of pain, anxiety-making, fascination, superb, hooked, fantastic, 'really good programme, really good viewing', 'bizarre</p>	<p>Reality/Fiction Awareness Personal experience (fears) Media Literacy</p>
<p>(8) Media Projections and Evaluations: Participants envisaging themselves in a certain situation, putting themselves into a character's or other (mediated) person's position</p> <p>Emotional position-taking, sometimes linked to values and personal experience, often a form of empathy</p>	<p>Beverly Allitt Moors murders (See No Evil) Holby City News – war in Beirut Flight 93</p>	<p>you feel their horror makes you think, made you wonder, empathy, '... how would we feel? And you feel desperate', knock-on effect, deeper thinking, 'how awful it must have been for their families, too'</p>	<p>Personal Experience (having grown up with it on the news, being a parent) Awareness</p>
<p>(9) Emotive media descriptions: The recounting or discussion of storylines and other plot elements, which indicates the kind of emotional involvement experienced</p> <p>Animated speech, often repetitive, emotional responses not always articulated, often accompanied by shock or disbelief</p>	<p>Moors murders (See No Evil) News – gratuitous violence Holby City Flight 93 Liverpool crush Pulp Fiction, Freddy vs. Jason David Blane</p>	<p>'and it was the... poor old parents whose child never got found', 'actually inflicting pain on each other... hitting each other, I couldn't believe it', 'he just had that huge shock', 'it was awful, people were literally crushed', 'still horrid now', 'violence and blood and gore... horrible', 'just kept kicking and kicking and kicking, I just couldn't imagine', DB: 'pulled the teeth out, they weren't loose, he just pulled the teeth out and she had blood and what was... going down here, and what was...'</p>	<p>Personal Experience (being a parent, family person, having been to a football ground)</p>

SOCIETAL			
<p>(10) Media-related concerns: Worries or concerns that are articulated with regards to the media</p> <p>Not about impacts on oneself, but about (sometimes implied) impacts on others, still contested/debated</p>	<p>Media violence Media effects and the youth Computers (Paedophilia) Decline of society – Change Media/Audience change Loss of childhood (swearing, sex) new channels (reality, trivia, sex, violence)</p>	<p>'That would never have happened years ago', kids are seeing things sooner, access to the internet, it's scary, 'you hear these stories about these girls', horror films more graphic now, only used to be Twilight Zone on Saturday nights, desensitised, TV creating culture (or the other way round?), can teenagers distinguish between reality and fiction?, different tolerance levels, harmful, high level of media violence, heavy television, 'it used to be more light-hearted', 'swearing creeps in', 'I think the media has got a lot to do with that'</p>	<p>Personal Experience (working at school) Reality/Fiction Media Literacy Media Critique</p>
<p>(11) Concerns about society as a whole: Participants' talk about society as a whole</p> <p>Tended to be negative, implied worries, sometimes backed up by media/personal evidence, static to a degree, but also still contested</p>	<p>Loss of childhood (sex, pubs, material ownership, swearing) Decline of society – Change Knife culture (from toy to weapon) Human gone wrong (Moors murders, Beverly Allitt, Jamie Bulger, Northern Ireland) Newspaper as source</p>	<p>'incredible, absolutely incredible' It's scary, things have changed, that individuals could behave in that way, Myra Hindley appeared so normal, probably people like that out there now, 'they're becoming adults far too young', 'everything is too easy for them these days', 'there's been such a lot on the news lately', 'you can be a completely innocent person and get into trouble, I don't see the way it's gone</p>	<p>Personal Experience</p>

What do I think I've learned from doing this...?

- ✓ Constant managing and negotiation of viewing experiences and emotional responses – **FEAR thresholds**
- ✓ FEAR not an isolated emotional response
- ✓ Routed in **life histories, personal values, and media preferences**
- ✓ Evaluated against the backdrop of reality/fiction divide, and within a time line ('time's a healer...')
- ✓ FEAR as **personal and relational** (e.g. parental worries, society)
- ✓ FEAR statements **embedded in wider frames of reference** about a person's sense of themselves and the world – e.g. 'phobias', decline of society, (media) violence, media effects

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Next steps...

- ✓ Apply table categorisations to at least one cross-match interview by 'constant comparison' – Are categories maintained or do they need revising?
- ✓ Investigate the remaining 18 interviews in the light of those categories (generational/national foci)
- ✓ Approach specific interview sections in detail, e.g. patterns, puzzles, negotiations...
 - Try to illuminate what exactly is going on in the talk
 - Look out for relationships between categories & moderating factors
 - Return to the question of the relationship between experience, talk, and action...

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Díolch, thank you!

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