

## Chapter one: introduction

### 1.1 Introduction to the problem

“Media have become the oxygen of our existence, that which once was seen as a medium for the educated, the privileged, the initiated, has become the essence upon which surrounds our daily existence... for good, for bad, or for the ugly, media affects us all” (Steinberg, 2007, p.XIV).

Media is defined as a distributor of information, ideas, and entertainment through radio, television, the press, films, marketing, and publications (Vasile, 2010). According to Vasile media have diverse functions; the first is educational because they can impart knowledge and can promote actions that have social utility. The second, states Vasile, is that media have the power to shape particular points of view due to the fact that they establish the policy agenda, as well as controversial issues. Vasile refers to media as an important source that can transform, model or change people’s opinions in diverse life aspects; he claims that people “...are educated [by media] to do things in a specific way” (p.26).

Moreover, as Steinberg (2007) mentions in her quote, media is part of people’s daily lives, to such a point that she dares to say that they “have become the oxygen of our existence” (p. XIV). The society in general is frequently exposed to them, if not always; this exposure affects individuals, as they become media consumers. What is more, this contact with media starts in the early years of childhood and because of the influence it has on the audience, there is a growing concern on the effects media can have on children and on the way it educates the young generations.

Alfonso Gutierrez (2008), professor of Education Technologies in the Universidad de Valladolid, states that television has been undoubtedly the most popular mass media of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that its transcendence and influence in the construction of society is

undeniable. Opinions on the current functions of television might be diverse as being an educator and others only an entertainer. In this respect, Gutierrez mentions that the role of television could be seen as an informal educator even if its purpose is to entertain because the content influences viewers' opinions, conceptions, ideologies and behaviors.

In addition to the concerns about how individuals are affected by their exposure to media, a particular aspect that has become a controversy for some parents, teachers, and researchers is the violence presented in children's television programs and entertainment because they have been considered as a medium through which children can learn, or imitate, aggressive conducts. Postman (1991, as cited in Gutierrez 2008) points out that the problem with television does not lie in the content media shows, but that what is presented is trivialized. Therefore, according to this author, the fact that television is exhibiting violence is not a problem; the dilemma is that it trivializes the violence that is being presented. For this reason, research has been conducted in different parts of the world to determine how exposure to this type of content on television affects children. In the following paragraphs, the findings of some studies reviewed by Brodeur (2007) will be provided.

In 1995, Wendy Josephson (as cited in Brodeur, 2007), researcher of the University of Winnipeg, found more than 650 studies that related real-life violence in children's behaviors to violence watched on TV. Furthermore, the epidemiologists at University of Washington, Brandon Centerwall (as cited in Brodeur, 2007), calculated that violence on television could account for 50% of the violence that is seen in real life. Moreover, Brodeur (2007) reports that children imitate television violence as they take it to mean that bullying, humiliating, and hurting others is accepted behavior. Also, he states that violence in television encourages between 5 and 10% of the victims of violence to accept it and to not look for help. In addition, the author points out that television violence reduces empathy in the witnesses of real violence and that "children become mentally altered and physically inclined to commit, accept,

or enjoy watching real-life violence” (p.668). Aggressive practices among children have alarmed educators, authorities and parents around the world since they have had worrisome consequences among youngsters. In addition to the possible outcomes violent content in television may have in the younger generations, there are other topics related to children and television that have received special attention and will be discussed in this section.

The first refers to the fact that nowadays television has been used by parents or caretakers as an effective babysitter that can keep children entertained and calmed for long periods of time. Dumitru (2010) explains this situation by mentioning that the role parents have in the modern family are considerably different to the role they had in the past. Nowadays, parents have better educational levels and incomes, which leave them with more professional responsibilities and less time to spend with their children. Therefore, some parents may opt for leaving children occupied watching television. In addition, the author says that parents often feel guilty for not spending enough time with the infants and become more tolerant to whatever they want to do, including the media content children want to have access to.

The second topic refers to the time children spend watching television. Dickinson reported in 2000 that children aged 2 to 5, were watching 1.5 hours of television per day. Ana Helena Meirelles (2005), General Director of Multifocus, a company that carries out marketing studies with a specialization in children behavior, comments that in Latin America the vast majority of children watch television about 3 hours or more per day. Recently, The Nielsen Company, a global marketing and research company, affirmed that American children are watching more and more television (McDonough, 2009). The Nielsen Company reported that children between 2 and 5 years old watch television for more than 32 hours a week; that is, an average of 4.5 hours per day. Moreover, the company comments that children aged between 6 and 11, watch about 28 hours a week, an average of 4 hours per day. The amount of time

children spend in front of the TV set has created concern since it has been linked to violent behaviors.

Brodeur (2007) mentions that the amount of time children are exposed to television has been related to behaviors such as bullying and that the time children spend watching television may affect their conduct. He refers to Frederick Zimmerman, professor in the University of Washington's School of Public Health, and the results he obtained in a study where he reports that children who spent about 3 ½ hours per day watching television, or the tube as it is referred to, "had 25% increased risk of becoming bullies between the ages of 6 and 11" (p.674). Furthermore, Brodeur leaves clear that watching television does not imply that the child viewer will become a bully, but that the chances of becoming one are higher.

Besides the time children spend watching television, another concern is the type of programs children are watching. The most common type of show children watch are cartoons which are programs intended for children and are supposed to be adequate for this audience. Nonetheless, Potter and Warren (1998) reported that cartoons had a higher rate of violence than other type of shows, and according to Dickinson (2000, ¶ 1), "fistfights, swordplay, falls from great heights, insults leading to injury,... increasingly dominate many of the movies we let our kids watch". Moreover, Dickinson comments that researchers at Harvard's School of Public Health revealed that the G rating, which is a certificate of approval that establishes that the content is appropriate for general audiences since no theme, language, nudity, sex, or violence is found in the movie (Motion Picture Association of America, 2011), of some of the children's films may no longer be the most appropriate to reflect the content some of these movies or shows present. This information suggests that the programs children are allowed to watch may be transmitting messages that are not so adequate for them. Dickinson mentions that the presence and intervention of an adult is necessary to help children process what is

being shown so that they do not result affected or desensitized to the genuine consequences of the violence that some television programs transmit.

The role media plays in today's society has been discussed, as well as the presence it has in people's lives and the power it may exert especially on its younger audiences; also, the particular attention that has been given to television, children, and violence, and the diverse research projects that have been carried out to find the possible correlations between violence in children's television programs and the violent behaviors some youngsters have shown. In addition, it has been mentioned that violence on television has been related to bullying, an issue that has augmented in the last decades and that is attracting the attention of parents, teachers, as well as of educational institutions, internationally. The reasons why these aggressive behaviors are present in today's society are certainly diverse and could well relate to aggressive situations in the child's environment, or violence within the family. Nonetheless, media have also been identified as very possible elements that disseminate the use of violence.

If media, particularly television and cartoons, are considered to be violent, and children are being exposed to this type of content regularly and for long periods of time, special attention should be given to the material the young generations are looking at. As it was already mentioned, television might not be the only source where children are learning these behaviors, but since it has become an important part of the modern society and children spend more time in front of the TV set, more considerations should be taken about the contents and representations television exposes.

Studies have been conducted globally to determine how children might be affected by the exposure of television. A considerable amount of studies related to this subject have been done in the United States; whereas in Mexico, only a few projects on the influence television has on the young generations have been carried out (Zárate & Castro, 2009). According to these authors, the results obtained from several researches coincide with the general

conclusion that television viewers learn from television, and that this learning influences their behaviors. Therefore, more importance should be given to research related to the content presented to children in Mexican television since it might provide clear demonstrations of what children are being exposed to through this popular medium and what they are learning from it.

## **1.2 Purpose of the study**

The main objective of this study is to analyze the discourse presented in a popular cartoon transmitted in Mexico, focusing specifically on the verbal mistreatments used in the program. The analysis will concentrate exclusively on verbal harassments since according to the president of Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos), Raúl Plascencia Villanueva, the highest percentage of aggressions among school children in Mexico are verbal, representing 41% of those mistreatments (CNDH, 2010).

In this project, language in the cartoon *The Fairly OddParents* will be explored to find out if children are being exposed to verbal aggressions through a popular television show. The reasons behind this project lie on the severe problem bullying represents for many children in Mexico, for the obstacle it creates for their appropriate development and well-being, as well as for children's adequate performance at school; issues that will be discussed in depth in Chapter two. Identifying if some of the language prototypes shown in a cartoon relate or correspond to the conducts children exhibit in schools may help create awareness and hopefully draw the necessary attention that will turn to action to deal with these alarming and growing circumstances.

For this study, violence will be defined as an antisocial conduct that includes all actions that are physically or psychologically insulting for one person or a group; these behaviors may be intentional or produced in a fortuitous manner (Greenberg, 1980, as cited in Potter & Warren, 1998). Verbal violence also referred to as verbal harassment, aggression,

mistreatment or assault in this study is considered as a form of violence (Greenberg, 1980, as cited in Potter & Warren, 1998). This type of aggression is not always regarded as a severe type of assault since it does not leave immediate or evident scars. Nonetheless, according to Mallon (2001) "continual verbal harassment erodes one's self of self-worth, self-esteem, and internal sense of fit" (p.70). Moreover, the author states that verbal violence is harmful to the victim's mental health.

Lucas, Pulido, Martín, and Calderón (2008) comment that several researchers such as Björkqvist, Lagerspetz & Sterman (1992), Crick & Grotpeter (1995), Owens, Dali & Slee (2005) have agreed on the fact that aggressions among children include direct and indirect forms. The aggressions that are classified as direct refer to actions that are done or said specifically and openly to someone; for example, hitting, insulting or pushing. On the other hand, indirect violence refers to those actions that may not be perceived as offensive; for instance, ignoring or lying about others. Moreover, the authors mentioned by Lucas et al. found that direct aggressions tend to be more common among boys, and indirect forms among girls. Taking into consideration these two forms of violent behaviors, verbal harassments may be direct or indirect as well. For the purpose of this study, insulting the victim in a direct manner, such as mockeries, name-calling, and wanting to hurt others will be considered as a direct form of verbal aggression. On the other hand, ignoring, excluding, lying about others, or speaking badly of others, will be considered as an indirect form of verbal harassment.

### **1.3 Hypothesis, research questions, and limitations of the study**

The hypothesis behind this investigation is that the cartoon *The Fairly OddParents* presents verbal aggressions, both direct and indirect; resulting in a model from where the young viewers can imitate or learn these forms of aggression. Moreover, it is believed that the females in the cartoon will use more indirect forms of verbal aggression, and that males will

use more the direct forms, as Björkqvist, Lagerspetz & Sterman (1992), Crick & Grotpeter (1995), Owens, Dali & Slee (2005, as cited in Lucas et al., 2008) comment.

The questions this study intends to answer are the following:

1. Are there direct forms of verbal aggression in the selected cartoon? If so, what types, and which are more common?
2. Are there indirect forms of verbal aggression in the selected cartoon? If so what types, and which are more common?
3. If direct and indirect verbal assaults are found, are direct forms used more by males than females; and, are indirect forms used more by females than by males?

The answers to these questions will demonstrate first if children are being exposed to verbal aggressions, direct or indirect, or not when watching *The Fairly OddParents*. Secondly, if verbal aggressions were found, information related to the type of mistreatments used in the cartoon would be provided. In addition, the information obtained related to the type of assault and the gender of the perpetrator would test the claims of authors such as Björkqvist, Lagerspetz & Sterman (1992), Crick & Grotpeter (1995), Owens, Dali & Slee (2005, as cited in Lucas et al., 2008).

The limitations of this study are that the exposure to media, particularly television and cartoons, might not be the only aspects that affect children's behaviors, opinions, attitudes or feelings. As it has been commented previously, there are other factors that also influence children's conducts, for example their families or their personality. Therefore, this study will present only one of the possible elements that might be having certain influence on the violent behaviors children are displaying with their peers.

Moreover, the analyzed episodes in this study do not represent all the cartoons or media children are exposed to, these are just some samples; a generalization can not be done



from the results obtained. Further research needs to be carried out with other TV shows, cartoons, videogames, magazines, etc. in order to determine to what extent violent content is present in children media, as well as the representations that are being shown, and to determine how they might be having an impact on the younger generations.

#### **1.4 Organization of the thesis**

In this first chapter, the important role media plays in society, and particularly television, was discussed. Also, issues related to television, children, and violence on programs that are intended for this audience were presented. Later, the existing link between the violent content children are exposed to on television and their more and more violent behaviors has been reviewed. The different forms of violent behaviors were presented, where direct and indirect forms of verbal aggressions are included. Also, a general description of this study was provided, mentioning the hypothesis, research questions, as well as its limitations.

In Chapter two, a review of the literature related to this topic will be presented. The first part will review what discourse is, how it is used by different fields of study, and how it relates with society, cognition and power. The second part of this section will provide information related to media, television, and the particular case of television and the young audiences. The third issue to be addressed will be bullying and its consequences with the particular case of Mexico and the possible causes of this problem. In the fourth and final part of the literature review, the mass media regulations that exist in Mexico will be presented.

Chapter three is dedicated to the methodology of this study. In this section, the materials used for the investigation, the participants, and procedures that were followed to carry out the research will be described.

In Chapter four, the results obtained from the analysis of discourse of The Fairly OddParents will be presented, as well as a discussion of the findings. Subsequently, the conclusions and recommendations will be included in Chapter five.