Partners' Influence on Each Other's Television Exposure: Dominance or Symmetry?

Ruben P. Konig, Gerbert Kraaykamp, and Henk Westerik

Radboud University Nijmegen

Ruben P. Konig, Department of Communication, Radboud University Nijmegen. Gerbert Kraaykamp, Department of Sociology, Radboud University Nijmegen. Henk Westerik, Department of Communication, Radboud University Nijmegen.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ruben P. Konig, Department of Communication, Radboud University Nijmegen, P.O.Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen, The Netherlands. E-mail: r.konig@ru.nl

Abstract

In this study we analyzed to what extent partners who share the same household affect each other's exposure to television. With the use of linear structural equation modeling we analyzed data from a large scale representative survey in The Netherlands (n 697 couples). Results indicate that both men and women influence their partner's exposure to television. When people spend much time watching television, their partners are also likely to spend a lot of time in front of the television. These influences on each other's exposure were of equal magnitude for both men and women. Finally, we found a strong socialization effect of parental viewing in the family of origin.

Keywords: media use, exposure to television, partners' influence, socialization effect, parental viewing, survey

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What people do in their leisure time is not only determined by what they really want to do, but also by what their social surroundings suggest they should do. Sitting in your garden may be all you want to do after a hard day's work, but your neighbor may force you to come out of your chair and talk to him by just popping his head over the hedge and starting a conversation. Or worse, he could even have you help him push his broken car up his driveway. We know from Berger and Luckmann's (1966/1991) insight in the construction of social reality that your neighbor does not even have to pop his head over the hedge, or even be at home, to make you do things you would rather not do, such as mowing your lawn, because you vicariously observe and judge yourself for your neighbor. With television, this is no different. For instance, many people feel guilty after watching television at night, instead of doing something 'useful' (cf. Hagen, 1997; Höijer, 1999). We know that others, whether actu-ally present or not, judge our actions and do not always condone our wasting time on television.

People's media use is constrained especially by members of their own households. For instance, based on their own research and research of many others, Webster and Wakshlag (1982; 1983) and Mutsaers (1996) argue that people's program choices depend on the program preferences of the group of people with whom they watch. World wide, family mem-bers influence and constrain each other's television use (Lull, 1988).

Among the specific others in people's households, partners play a special role. Partners tend to spend their leisure time together (Kalmijn and Bernasco, 2001), and they tend to watch television together as well (McDonald, 1985, 1986). If men and women engage in such shared leisure time activities, this creates mutual dependencies; the more they share activities together in their leisure time, the more their well-being depends on each other

(Kalmijn and Bernasco, 2001). Simultaneously, they learn how their partners give meaning to these joint activities. All of this makes it likely that partners influence each other's definition of the situation concerning television viewing (cf. Gantz, 2001; Gunter and Svennevig, 1987; Renckstorf and Wester, 2004). Subsequently, partners mutually shape each other's decisions to watch television or not, and thus mutually influence the amount of time they spend watching television (Kraaykamp, Van Eijck, Ultee, and Van Rees, 2007; Westerik, Renckstorf, Wester, and Lammers, 2005).

Qualitative research has consistently indicated that people from the same household affect each other's viewing behavior (Gantz, 2001; Krendl, Troiano, Dawson, and Clark, 1993; Lull, 1988, 1990; Morley, 1986). Unfortunately, quantitative researchers have paid less attention to this topic. Of course, there are notable exceptions (Copeland and Schweitzer, 1993; Huysmans, 2001; Kraaykamp et al., 2007; McDonald, 1985, 1986; Mutsaers, 1996; Westerik et al., 2005), but we know of no large scale survey research that focuses on both partners' exposure to television. Survey research has mainly focused on the factors that influence exposure to television of individuals (e. g., Bonfadelli, 1993; Frissen, 1996; Kraaykamp, 2001), but has hardly focused on how these factors influence the exposure of their partners. We therefore investigated the extent to which partners influence each other's exposure to television.

Male dominance

One aspect of the influence of partners on each other's television exposure is dominance. Do men affect their wives regarding television watching to a larger extent than vice versa? Evidence on who decides what type of program to watch suggests that male dominance is most likely to occur (Copeland and Schweitzer, 1993; Gantz, 2001; Krendl et al., 1993; Lull, 1990; Morley, 1986; Mutsaers, 1996). Evidence regarding exposure per se,

however, is inconclusive. McDonald (1985) found indications for slight male dominance in the USA, whereas Huysmans (2001) found no evidence of male or female dominance in The Netherlands and Sweden. But since the male dominance thesis has frequently received theoretical and empirical support in sociological research (Bourdieu, 1998/2001; Van Berkel, 1997), we hypothesize that we will find male dominance with respect to television exposure in our study.

Empirical research from the United States (McDonald, 1985), The Netherlands, and Sweden (Huysmans, 2001), suggests that partners are inclined to watch television together. Thus, it seems likely that the average amount of time people spend in front of a television set is positively affected by the amount of time their partners spend watching television. In short, one is inclined to watch more if one's partner spends more time on television viewing 1. However, as argued in the previous paragraph, we expect the influence of husbands' viewing to be stronger than wives' viewing on their spouses' amount of television exposure (Hypothesis A).

Of course, the duration of a person's exposure to television is not only influenced by his or her partner's viewing time, it is first and foremost affected by his or her individual characteristics. For instance, higher educated people spend less time watching television than lower educated people (Frissen, 1996; Huysmans, De Haan and Van den Broek, 2004; Kraaykamp, 2001; Kraaykamp et al., 2007; Moy, Scheufele, and Holbert, 1999). People from the lower-middle and lower classes spend more time watching television than individuals from the upper-middle and higher classes (Beville, 1988; Moy et al., 1999). Work-related factors seem important too. People with work obligations outside the family home watch less television and homemakers are obviously in a situation where they can watch more (Huysmans et al., 2004; Kraaykamp et al., 2007). Furthermore, older people spend more time watching television than middle aged and younger people (Abrahamsson,

1994; Huysmans et al., 2004; Mares and Woodard, 2006; Moy et al., 1999; Van der Goot, Beentjes, and Van Selm, 2006). And finally, the example set by someone's parents in his/her youth is positively related to the amount of television use later in life (Kraaykamp, 2001). In sum, we expected that the amount of time an individual spends on watching television is influenced by his/her background characteristics (composite Hypothesis B).

People's background characteristics, however, can also affect the time spent on television by their partners. They could lead to a more negative or positive attitude toward watching television (Mielke, 1965) and, in turn, this attitude is most probably known to their partners and will likely affect their choices in watching television as well, whether their partner is present or not. In more general terms, people's background characteristics may influence their partners' definition of the situation concerning watching television (cf. Gantz, 2001; Renckstorf and Wester, 2004). Therefore, we expected people's background characteristics to affect the amount of television viewing by their partners. We presumed that the relationships between these background characteristics and one's partner's viewing time were comparable to those discussed in respect to the composite Hypothesis B and again we hypothesized male dominance (composite Hypothesis C).

Finally, research done by McDonald (1985) suggests that television exposure of both partners might be influenced by other people in their household. Gunter and Svennevig (1987) and Mutsaers (1996) have shown that household size and duration of exposure to television are negatively related; children (and others) in a household cause both partners to watch less television. The reason for this could be that children need to be cared for, played with, and talked to, all of which takes up time. Thus, we deemed household size a factor that needed to be addressed in this study, and we expected it to be negatively related to the amount of time spent on watching television by both partners (Hypothesis D).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 depicts our general analytic model in an abstract way. The characters used to mark the arrows refer to the hypotheses we formulated above. Our main hypothesis of male dominance, however, is not depicted in this figure. In Figure 1, the null hypothesis is drawn, with equal characters indicating effects of equal strength. If there is male dominance between partners with respect to exposure to television, we should be able to reject this null hypothesis.

Data, Measurements and Method

Data

To test our expectations we used data from the Family Survey of the Dutch Population (FSDP) collected in 1998 (De Graaf, De Graaf, Kraaykamp, and Ultee, 1998). The FSDP investigated the life situation of the Dutch-speaking population of the Netherlands between the ages of 18 and 70. Face-to-face interviews were held with respondents (N 1,148) and, if married or cohabiting, their partners (N 878), followed by a self-administered questionnaire.

For this FSDP-survey, a sample of primary respondents was drawn randomly from population registers of a stratified sample of Dutch municipalities (stratified with respect to region and urbanization). A contact rate (contacted people compared to the total sample) of 91.1 % was accomplished and 54.4 % cooperated with the face-to-face interview (cooperation rate), resulting in a response rate of 47.3%. As there was no selective non-response in respect to major stratification aspects, we consider our findings representative for the Dutch adult population of 1998. We applied list-wise deletion of

couples for which information on a variable was missing (20.6 %). The final data-set
consisted of 697 male-female couples with complete information.

Measurements

The questionnaires for men and women were identical. Accordingly, the measurement
instruments we discuss below apply to both partners in a couple.

We measured exposure to television by asking how much time respondents spent
watching television on average: (a) on weekdays, and (b) during the weekend. Possible
answers were, (1) never, (2) less than one hour a day, (3) between 1 and 2 hours a day, (4)
between 2 and 3 hours a day, and (5) more than 3 hours a day. We combined the answers to
the two questions into one single measure for exposure using estimated category means
derived from data from another Dutch survey (Konig et al., 2000) 2. Figure 2 shows the
distribution of this measure of exposure separately for men and women. Clearly, the
distributions for men and women are different. Within couples, variance among women is
larger than among men (two-tailed Morgan-Pitman test t_{mw} 59.157, df 695, p < .001) and
on average women watch more than men (two-tailed paired samples t-test t_{mw} 3.249, df 696, p
.001).

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

We measured level of education as the highest educational level that was completed
by the respondents or by their partners. It varied from 1 (no primary education) to 10 (post
doctoral education). We measured occupational status as an indication of social class, using
the ISEI classification by Ganzeboom and Treiman (1996). For people without a job, we used
their last occupation. We measured working hours in a paid job or as a business owner as an

indicator for having an occupation outside the family home. We measured whether or not respondents characterized themselves as homemakers or not when they indicated that they did not have a job and did not own a business. We measured age through year of birth of both spouses, but we deployed the mean age of a couple in our analysis to avoid problems of multi-colinearity. To allow for the possibility of curvilinear relationships to be found in our analysis, we also categorized the mean age of the couples into three categories (w 35 years; 3650 years; x 51 years). For the same reason we categorized household size into four categories (2 people; 3 people; 4 people; x 5 people). Finally, we measured how much the respondents' parents watched television in the respondents' youth with a retrospective question. Respondents could answer (1) never, (2) less than one hour a day, (3) between one and two hours a day, (4) between 2 and 3 hours a day, and (5) more than 3 hours a day.

Method

We tested our hypotheses through linear structural equation modeling using Lisrel (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1996). All variables in our model were treated as observed variables. We assumed all variables to be of interval level, except age, being a homemaker or not, and household size. We put the latter three into the equations as sets of dummies, to allow for the possibility of curvilinear relationships, or because of the innate nominal character of the variable. To obtain a common metric for the variables for men and women, we standardized the interval variables with the use of a z-transformation on the combined data of men and women. Consequently, the parameter estimates for the interval variables are quasi-standardized, and can be compared within, as well as between, men and women.

We obtained maximum likelihood estimates, assuming that errors in the equations were not correlated. Furthermore, in accordance with the null hypothesis to our main hypothesis of male dominance, we used equality constraints to test whether the parameters in the equation for the exposure of women were identical to the corresponding parameters in the equation for the exposure of men. In addition, we performed a Likelihood Ratio test (Bollen, 1989) for every single parameter to compare our model, with equality constraints, with an identical model without the equality constraint for this parameter. (The Appendix shows our Lisrel syntax to allow replication of our results.)

Results

The linear structural equation model appeared to fit well with the data.. The goodness of fit statistics indicated so (GFI > .99; AGFI = .97; SRMR = .01; RMSEA = .01; χ^2 = 16.2, df = 15, p = .37; AIC / independence / saturated = 292 / 3882 / 306; CAIC / independence / saturated = 3976 / 1058 / 1155), the standardized residuals were not significant at p < .05 level, and the modification indices all had values well below 5.

The results of the structural equation modeling are presented in the columns for men and women in Table 1. Since parameter estimates for men and women appeared to be equal (as predicted in the null hypothesis as opposed to our main hypothesis of male dominance), strictly, one of these columns is redundant. Still, both columns are presented for clarity's sake. The right three columns in the table display the results of the Likelihood Ratio tests (Bollen, 1989).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Table 1 shows that our hypotheses were partially supported. First, both men and women's exposure to television is positively affected by their partners' exposure (in Table 1 both parameters are .12). Thus, in accordance with hypothesis A, watching more television or less television encourages one's partner to do likewise.

Second, most, but not all of the social background characteristics have the expected effects on the amount of time spent watching television (Hypothesis B). As expected, educational attainment affects viewing time negatively (-.15), as do the number of working hours (-.13), and a person's occupational status (-.06). The mean age of the couple exerts a positive, but slightly curvilinear effect on exposure. Only the youngest age group differs significantly from the middle age group (-.13). The largest parameter in the table is the one for the socialization effect of parental viewing in the family of origin. When parents used to watch television a lot, their offspring is likely to do so as well (.32). Being a homemaker is the only social background characteristic that is not significant.

Third, with regard to the expected influence of partners' background characteristics (Hypothesis C), we found only one significant effect. An increasing level of education of one spouse reduces the amount of time the other spouse spends on television (-.09). Other background characteristics of one of the partners do not affect the amount of television use by their counterparts.

Fourth, in accordance with hypothesis D, household size proved relevant for the explanation of television exposure of both partners. Couples living in a household that consists of four or more people watch significantly less television than couples in 2- or 3-person households (-.20 and -.17 respectively).

Finally, likelihood ratio tests indicated that at p < .05 significance level, none of the equality constraints in our initial linear structural equation model had to be removed to improve the model. Thus, our main hypothesis of male dominance had to be discarded.

Discussion

In this study we investigated how men and women affect each other's exposure to television. Two conclusions can be drawn. First, a person's background characteristics influence the time that a person spends on television viewing, and in turn, this exposure affects a person's partner's exposure. Thus, people's background characteristics predominantly affect the time their spouses spend in front of the television set indirectly. The exception to this indirect influence is the direct influence of people's educational attainment on their spouses' television viewing. The higher people are educated, the less time their spouses spend watching television; independent from these people's own exposure to television. Second, the effects of both spouses' background characteristics and their partner's exposure on their own television viewing time are identical for men and women. It seems that with regard to the time spent in front of the television set, no male dominance can be found. The male dominance thesis has to be refuted with regard to exposure to television. Evidently, men and women are equal in this respect.

Clearly, husbands and wives play a role in each other's everyday behavior concerning television, but that is not a new conclusion in itself. Qualitative research has long established similar conclusions (e. g. Lull, 1988, 1990; Morley, 1986). Here, however, we could quantify this role, using large-scale representative data. With our data, we established both substance and symmetry of the mutual influence of partners on each other's exposure to television. Thus, we were able to contribute to a classic subject of communication research using a methodology hitherto unused in this field of study. However, our study is limited in that it

does not measure whether partners actually watch television together, and in that it utilizes a rather crude concept of television viewing behavior: exposure. Future research might build upon this study and previous research by overcoming these limitations. Additionally, future qualitative research might help to better understand our findings. For instance, we do not know why there is no male dominance with respect to partners' mutual influence on their television exposure, whereas there is evidence of male dominance in many other aspects of life.

By far the most important social background characteristic seems to be parental exposure to television in the respondents' youth. As parents watch more television in their children's youth, their children are inclined to watch more television as adults too3. The occurrence of this socialization effect comes as no surprise (Bandura and Walters, 1963; Kraaykamp, 2001; Roe, 2000), but we did not expect it to be the most important determinant of a person's exposure to television. We interpret this as an indication that the amount of time that people watch television may be more than just some behavior copied from their parents. It may be an integral part of their lifestyle, passed on to them by their parents and signifying their social status.

What pleads against this idea is that Western people usually watch television in the privacy of their homes (Lull, 1988). What pleads for this idea, however, is that people also talk about what they saw on television (DiMaggio, 1987; Lull, 1980), which makes it possible for others to infer the amount of time that they spend in front of the set. Assuming that little cultural capital is needed to enjoy television consumption (cf. DiMaggio, 1987), the heavy viewer is thus exposed as having a lifestyle that requires little cultural capital and that consequently signifies little social status (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). Now, cultural capital is mainly acquired in one's youth through socialization at home and at school (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970/1990), but parents can only pass on what they

themselves possess. If parents have little cultural capital, which may be expressed in a lifestyle that involves watching television a lot, they cannot pass it on to their children; who may as a consequence develop a lifestyle that involves heavy viewing, too. Parents' lifestyle may pervade their children's lifestyle, thus reproducing their television viewing behavior.

This interpretation of the effect of parental exposure to television in the respondents' youth with cultural capital and reproduction of lifestyles is perfectly compatible with our result that a higher education and occupational status reduce the inclination to watch television. Bourdieu (1979/1984; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970/1990) forcefully argues that a higher education results in more cultural capital, and that a higher occupational status and cultural capital usually go hand-in-hand. Thus, education and occupational status should work in the opposite direction from parental viewing on the time spent on television, which is what we found.

All in all, we conclude that television watching is probably still a joint leisure time activity for spouses and part of a lifestyle that they, in part, inherited from their parents. This makes it a lasting subject for research, since shared leisure time activities create dependencies and tuning problems within a family (Kalmijn and Bernasco, 2001), and reproduction of lifestyles is a major topic in sociology and social psychology. The fact that we did not find male dominance where we expected to find it makes it all the more interesting for future research.

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Footnotes

[1] Alternatively, one could argue that people with similar habits tend to become partners, thus causing a spurious relationship. However, as Harwood (2007, pp. 179-182) and Mares and Woodard (2006) show, exposure varies through the life cycle, which causes ample opportunity for partners to influence each other's exposure when their own level of exposure gradually decreases or increased over the years.

[2] Means to the categories were estimated at 0 minutes for people who never watched television; 45 minutes for people who watched less than one hour a day; 105 minutes for people who watched between one and two hours a day; 165 minutes for people who watched between two and three hours a day; and 285 minutes for people who watched more than three hours a day.

[3] We have to keep in mind that our results are based on self-reports. Thus it may be that heavy viewers reported that their parents were heavy viewers too, whereas in fact they were not. However, since our results can be interpreted well, we are inclined to assume that the respondents reported on their parents' viewing habits more or less accurately.

Appendix

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Lisrel analysis of television exposure of partners
DA NI=17 NO=697
LA
*
'mTV' 'wTV'
'meducat' 'mTVparnt' 'mstatus' 'mhours' 'mhomemak'
'weducat' 'wTVparnt' 'wstatus' 'whours' 'whomemak'
'young' 'old' 'hhsize3' 'hhsize4' 'hhsize5'
CM
*
 .812
 .329 1.158
-.287 -.294 1.050
 .302  .144 -.128  .997
-.209 -.170  .570 -.174  .987
-.071 -.005  .049  .238  .007  .792
 .000  .002 -.002 -.002  .001 -.005  .003
-.235 -.371  .508 -.002  .303  .049  .004  .927
 .115  .298 -.099  .430 -.110  .229 -.001 -.055 1.003
-.217 -.291  .412 -.084  .292  .062  .001  .502 -.056  .985
 .006 -.148  .128  .162  .057  .133  .001  .243  .101  .183  .642
-.011  .079 -.082 -.092 -.028 -.067 -.001 -.119 -.055 -.071 -.274  .227
 .008  .008 -.028  .121 -.077  .090 -.001  .054  .147  .005  .105 -.044  .215
-.011  .011 -.020 -.209  .022 -.170  .001 -.080 -.203 -.027 -.099  .055 -.076  .185
 .019  .041 -.015  .037  .000  .014 -.001 -.018  .025  .005  .000 -.001  .013 -.006  .146
-.008 -.015 -.039  .057 -.028  .057  .001 -.001  .078 -.039 -.035  .003 -.012 -.054 -.051  .206
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-.022 -.010  .041  .015  .015  .044  .000  .007  .012  .005 -.039  .013 -.023 -.026 -.025 -.040  .120
MO NY=2 NX=15 FI BE=FU GA=FI
FR BE(1,2)
EQ BE(1,2) BE(2,1)
FR GA(1,1) GA(1,2) GA(1,3) GA(1,4) GA(1,5)
EQ GA(1,1) GA(2,6)
EQ GA(1,2) GA(2,7)
EQ GA(1,3) GA(2,8)
EQ GA(1,4) GA(2,9)
EQ GA(1,5) GA(2,10)
FR GA(2,1) GA(2,2) GA(2,3) GA(2,4) GA(2,5)
EQ GA(2,1) GA(1,6)
EQ GA(2,2) GA(1,7)
EQ GA(2,3) GA(1,8)
EQ GA(2,4) GA(1,9)
EQ GA(2,5) GA(1,10)
FR GA(1,11) GA(1,12) GA(1,13) GA(1,14) GA(1,15)
EQ GA(1,11) GA(2,11)
EQ GA(1,12) GA(2,12)
EQ GA(1,13) GA(2,13)
EQ GA(1,14) GA(2,14)
EQ GA(1,15) GA(2,15)
OU SL=5 RS MR MI SC ND=3
```

Table 1

Regression of Men and Women's Exposure to Television on Their Own and Partner's

Background Characteristics, and on Their Partner's Exposure to Television

	Exposure to television[a]		*LR* [b]	*df*	*p*
	Men	Women			
Self					
Education	-.15*	-.15*	2.96	1	.08
Occupational status	-.06*	-.06*	2.60	1	.11
Working hours	-.13*	-.13*	.02	1	.89
Homemaker	.12	.12	.14	1	.70
Exposure parents	.32*	.32*	.06	1	.81
Partner					
Exposure to television	.12*	.12*	1.56	1	.21
Education	-.09*	-.09*	.00	1	.97
Occupational status	-.02	-.02	.77	1	.38
Working hours	.02	.02	.02	1	.88
Homemaker	-.11	-.11	3.38	1	.07
Exposure parents	.00	.00	.62	1	.80
Couple					
Mean age:			1.58	2	.45
≤35[c]	-.13*	-.13*			
≥51[c]	.07	.07			
Household size:			3.16	3	.37
3[d]	-.01	-.01			
4[d]	-.20*	-.20*			
≥5[d]	-.17*	-.17*			
R^2	.30	.24			

Note. N = 697.

[a] Quasi-standardized maximum likelihood parameter estimates. [b] Likelihood Ratio (*LR*) for

comparison with the model without the equality constraint that this parameter is equal for

men and women (χ^2 distributed with *df* degrees of freedom and probability *p*). [c] Dummy with

reference category: 36-50 years of age. [d] Dummy with reference category: household size of

2.

* *p* < .05.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Abstract General Model (effects of equal strength are indicated by identical

characters; characters refer to hypotheses)

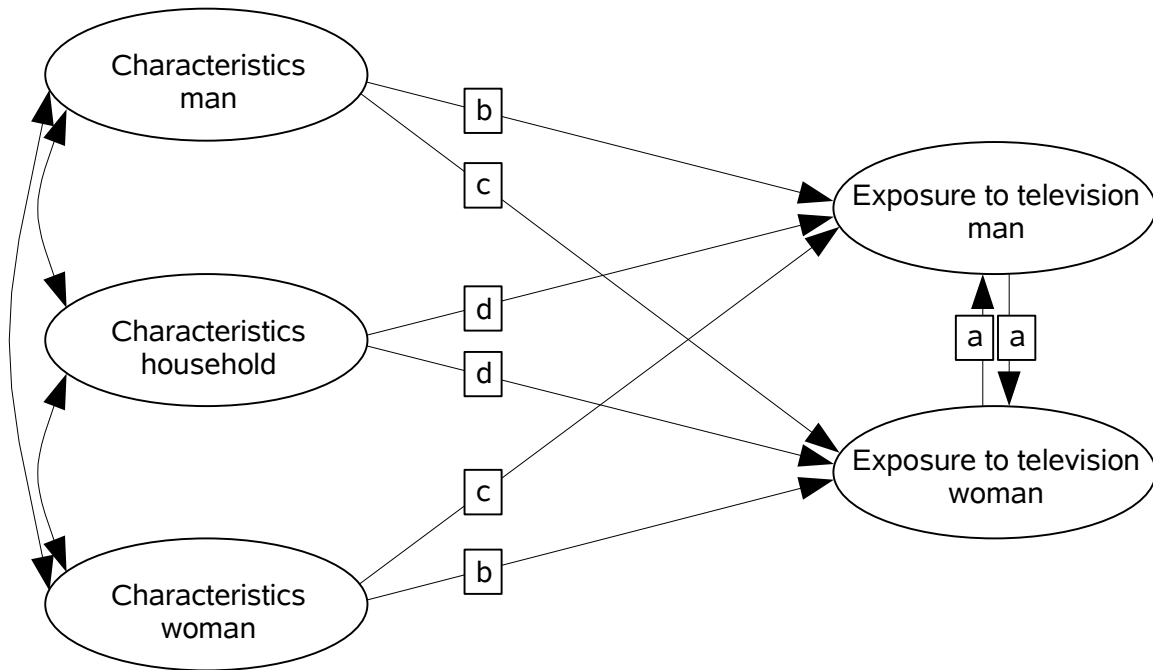*Figure 2.* Average Exposure of Men and Women to Television (% of 697)

Figure 1

Figure 2