

## **Where Are the Experts? Psychologists in the Media**

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### **Abstract**

The ethical principles to which psychologists adhere have changed significantly over the years (Klonoff, 1983). One of the major changes that has occurred relates to psychologists in the media. While in the 1970s psychologists were prohibited from providing psychological services outside the context of a professional relationship, psychologists in the 1990s are allowed to provide advice or comment under certain conditions (Principle 4-k, APA, 1981; Principle 4-k, APA, 1990, Principle 3.04, APA, 1992). Thus, it would be expected that psychologists would now appear in the media with some regularity. The purpose of this study was to assess the frequency with which psychologists appeared on television talk shows.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the first stage of this research was to examine the frequency with which psychologists appeared on television talk shows. Prior to discussing the methodology of this research, a summary of changes in the ethical principles that relate to media presentations by psychologists will be presented, and a definition of "expert" will be offered.

### **Overview of Ethical Principles**

As demonstrated by the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles, the guidelines for psychologists appearing in the media have evolved over time. According to Klonoff (1983) all versions of the Ethical Principles from 1953 through 1981 prohibited "sensationalism, exaggeration or superficiality" (Klonoff, 1983, p. 851; Principle 1.44-1, APA, 1953; Principle 5-a, APA, 1963; Principle 4-t APA, 1977; Principle 4-g, APA, 1981); the 1989 revision of the Ethical Principles prohibits presentations of this type as well (Principle 4-g, APA, 1990). In contrast, the most current revision of the Ethical Principles (APA, 1992) makes no reference to the words sensationalism exaggeration, and superficiality.

A major change in the Ethical Principles over the years relates to the delineation of the role of psychologists in the media. While earlier versions of the Ethical Principles specifically prohibited psychologists from providing psychological services outside the context of a professional relationship (e.g., Principle 4-i, APA, 1977), later versions allowed psychologists to provide advice or comment (Principle 4-k, APA, 1981, p.635); Principle 4-k, APA, 1990, p.392). The revised 1992 guidelines are the most specific to date:

*When psychologists provide advice or comment by means of public lectures, demonstrations, radio, or television programs, prerecorded tapes, printed articles, mailed material, or other media, they take reasonable precautions to ensure that (1) the statements are based on appropriate psychological literature and practice, (2) the statements are otherwise consistent with this Ethics Code, and (3) the recipients of the information are not encouraged to infer that a relationship has been established with them personally (Principle 3.04, APA, 1992, p. 1604).*

It might be inferred from the positive phrasing used in this ethical guideline that there is more support now, in the 1990s, for psychologists to present information through such media as television and radio than there has been in the past. Hence, it would be expected that psychologists would appear in the media with some regularity.

### **Definition of "Experts"**

Before an assessment of the types of experts who appeared on television was made, a definition of "expert" was constructed. According to Webster's New World Dictionary (1982) an "expert" (noun) is someone who is "very skillful, having much training and knowledge in some special field" (p. 493). Similarly, Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1987) defines an expert as "one with the special skill or knowledge representing mastery of a particular subject" (p. 437). By the first definition, a person would need to complete some type of schooling and/or apprenticeship (i.e., training) and also demonstrate knowledge of the field to become an expert. According to this definition, experts might include such people as electricians, college professors, hair stylists, and psychologists. By the second definition, a person would need to acquire mastery of a subject, which means the person possesses or displays great skill, knowledge, or technique in some work, profession, or science (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1987; Webster's New World Dictionary, 1982). While this second definition does not specify "training" as a prerequisite for mastery, it does imply that the person is well-versed in the subject area of "expertness". Thus, in addition to someone who has received formalized training in a specific area of knowledge, someone with extensive life experience in a particular area might be considered an expert (e.g., a do-it-yourself home repair person) as might someone who engaged in a process of self-study (informal training) to learn about a particular subject (e.g., a self-taught classical pianist).

Based on the above definitions of "expert", one important point must be made: Just as a single case study is not accepted as representative of a population being studied, having had one life experience does not make someone an expert. A personal experience (e.g., having lived in Iowa) is the beginning of a foundation of knowledge that leads to expertness, but the experience in and of itself does not necessarily make the person an expert (one who can address the subject area with thoroughness that is representative of the subject area as a whole). Thus, for the purposes of this research those people who appear on television to discuss personal experiences cannot be considered experts unless they also possess or display extensive skill, knowledge, or technique in their particular subject area.

### **Methodology**

To examine the frequency with which psychologists appeared on television talk shows, six daily television talk shows (four network, two cable) and four network, weekly, evening news magazine shows (N = 272) were recorded for a eight-week period. The four daily network talk shows included Donahue, Geraldo, Oprah, and Sally Jesse Raphael and the two daily cable talk shows included Larry King Live and Sonya Live. The four weekly television news magazines included 20/20, 48 Hours, 60 Minutes, and Prime Time Live. The time period during which the recordings were made started on December 1, 1991 and ended on January 24, 1992.

Of the 272 shows scheduled, 30 were not available for analysis as a result of one of the following: (1) the show was not on because it had been superseded by another show (e.g., special news report, sports event, after-school special); (2) the show was not taped due to a taping error (e.g., VCR programmed incorrectly, electricity off) or tape damage; or (3) the tape had been misplaced. Thus, a total of 242 shows were available for analysis (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Television shows taped over the 8-week period from December 1/91 to January 24/92.**

Show Title	N	Off	NT	?	Taped
20/20	8	0	0	1	7
48 Hours	8	0	0	1	7
60 Minutes	8	0	1	0	7
Donahue	40	2	1	0	37
Geraldo	40	4	1	0	35
Larry King Live	40	1	0	0	39
Oprah	40	2	3	8	27
Prime Time Live	8	2	0	0	6
Sally Jesse Raphael	40	1	0	0	39
Sonya Live	40	1	1	0	38
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>272</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>242</b>

Off = show not on because of being superceded by another show (e.g. special news report, sports event, after-school special)

NT = show not taped due to taping error (e.g., VCR programmed incorrectly, electricity off) or tape damage

? = show not reviewed (missing tape)

taped = show was taped

Each show was reviewed for subject matter, the types of guests appearing (expert and non-expert; see above definition), the credentials of any experts who appeared, and the approximate amount of time the experts appeared on the show. In addition, the topics discussed on each show were classified independently by the authors as to their content: nonpsychological or psychological. Shows that were rated as "nonpsychological" were those in which the topics covered were not psychological in nature (e.g., an interview with a political figure) or the treatment of the topic was not psychological in nature (e.g., reuniting twins separated at birth, providing technical information on how to adopt a child). Shows that were rated as "psychological" were those in which the topics covered were psychological in nature (e.g., rape) and the treatment of the topic was psychological in nature (e.g., surviving trauma). Of the 242 shows available for analysis, all or part of 146 shows (60%) were rated as having psychological content (see Table 2). These results indicated that if a person wants to watch a talk show or an evening news magazine that contains psychological content addressed from a psychological standpoint the best three choices might be Sally Jesse Raphael (87%), Sonya Live (79%), and Oprah (74%).

**Table 2: Percentages of shows by type of topic (nonpsychological or psychological).**

Show Title	N	No	Yes
20/20	7	2 29%	5 71%
48 Hours	7	4 57%	3 43%
60 Minutes	7	4 57%	3 43%
Donahue	37	14 38%	23 62%
Geraldo	35	14 40%	21 60%
Larry King Live	39	34 87%	5 13%
Oprah	27	7 26%	20 74%
Prime Time Live	6	4 67%	2 33%
Sally Jesse Raphael	39	5 13%	34 87%
Sonya Live	38	8 12%	30 79%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>96</b> <b>40%</b>	<b>146</b> <b>60%</b>

N = total excludes missing data

No = topic of show was not psychological in nature (e.g., an interview with a political figure) or the treatment of the topic was not psychological in nature (e.g., reuniting twins separated at birth, providing technical information on how to adopt a child)

Yes = topic of show was psychological in nature (e.g., rape) and the treatment of the topic was psychological in nature (e.g., surviving trauma)

## Results

The portion of the data analysis reported in this section focuses on the type of issues addressed by these television shows (psychological or nonpsychological) and the type of experts who appeared on these shows to address these issues. Of the 146 shows with psychological content, 32 (22%) did not feature any experts, as defined above. Instead, the guests were people who had personal experience with the issue being presented (e.g., a mother whose daughter was murdered, people who date interracially, husbands who behave as if they are single and their wives, members of the KKK, a wife who survived her husband's affair, men discussing how to know when a woman wants sex, celebrities revealing their personal histories of incest). Of the remaining shows, all included at least one "expert" (someone whose credentials stated or implied that the person possessed extensive skill, knowledge, or technique in their particular subject area). A total of 158 "experts" appeared on the 146 shows with psychological content. Table 3 displays the primary credential stated by the "expert" and/or by the host, further subdivided by television show. All labels for "type of expert" are the labels given by the "expert" and/or by the host of the show. Thus, for example, "family therapist" and "marriage and family therapist" are listed as separate categories because one group of experts used one descriptor and one group of

experts used the other. There was no way to tell from the information given on the shows whether the backgrounds of any of the "experts" in similar groups were similar or whether the differences in descriptors reflected differences in training and/or experience.

**Table 3: Primary credential of the "experts" who appeared subdivided by television show.**

Type of Expert <sup>1</sup>	20/20	48 Hours	60 Minutes	PrimeTime	Donahue	Geraldo
wrote a book <sup>2</sup>						1
agency representative <sup>3</sup>	3	1		3	1	4
"expert in..." <sup>4</sup>						2
doctoral degree <sup>5</sup>		1			3	3
university professor				3	3	2
family therapist						1
marriage & family therapist						
social worker						
M.S.W.						1
medical doctor	1		1	1	2	4
psychiatrist	1				1	
counselor	1	1				
therapist					1	
psychotherapist	1	1			2	1
hypnotherapist						
psychologist	1				2	2
organizational psychologist						
parapsychologist						
social psychologist						
sports psychologist						
other <sup>6</sup>					3	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>22</b>

**Table 3 (continued): Primary credential of the "experts" who appeared subdivided by television show.**

Type of Expert <sup>1</sup>	Oprah	Sally Jesse	Larry King	Sonya Live	Totals	%
wrote a book <sup>2</sup>	5	3	3	9	21	13%
agency representative <sup>3</sup>	1	4	2	2	21	13%
"expert in..." <sup>4</sup>				1	3	2%
doctoral degree <sup>5</sup>		2		6	15	9%
university professor		1		7	16	10%
family therapist	1			1	3	2%
marriage & family therapist				2	2	1%
social worker		1		2	3	2%
M.S.W.					1	1%

medical doctor		1	1	2	12	8%
psychiatrist		2		3	7	4%
counselor	1	2			5	3%
therapist	2				3	2%
psychotherapist	3	1		3	12	8%
hypnotherapist	1				1	1%
psychologist	4	4		5	18	11%
organizational psychologist				1	1	1%
parapsychologist	1				1	1%
social psychologist	1	1		1	3	2%
sports psychologist				1	1	1%
other <sup>6</sup>	1	2		2	9	6%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100%</b>

1 -- "Type of expert" is the person or host's label of the expert's credentials.

2 -- This category is for people who wrote a book but stated no other credentials (with the exception of someone who also worked for an agency/organization, see below)

3 -- This category includes people whose primary credential was being a representative of a specific agency (e.g., the director of a drug treatment center, the coordinator of a child health agency).

4 -- This category is for people who claimed expertise in an area (e.g., child abuse, sex education) but did not offer any other credentials.

5 -- This category includes people whose primary credential was an Ed.D., Ph.D., or title of "Dr." (excluding medical doctors).

6 -- This category includes miscellaneous experts (e.g., a British psychologist not included in this analysis, a teacher, an etiquette consultant, magazine editors)

Most of the categories in Table 3 are self-explanatory (e.g., medical doctor, social worker). Some are not, and explanations for these categories follow: (1) Those in the "wrote a book" category gave no other credentials than having written a book; (2) The category, "agency representative", includes people whose primary credential was being a representative of a specific agency or organization (e.g., the director of a drug treatment center, the coordinator of a child health agency); (3) The category, "experts in..." includes people who claimed expertise in an area (e.g., child abuse, sex education) but did not offer any other credentials; (4) the category "doctoral degree" included those whose primary credentials was an Ed.D., Ph.D., or title of "Dr." (excluding medical doctors) and who gave no other credentials.

As stated earlier, the focus of this research is on psychologists. More specifically, the main interest of the authors was on psychologists who are likely to be engaged in the provision of therapeutic services. The results showed that, of the 158 "experts" on shows with psychological content, only 18 (12%) were psychologists whose primary work task is (most likely) offering therapeutic services to clients. Thus, psychologists were not well-represented on the television shows reviewed.

One question about which the authors were curious that went beyond the scope of the present research and that could not be addressed directly by the data available for analysis was how

someone is chosen to appear on a television show. One proposed hypothesis was that those who appeared on the television shows would probably be people who had written a book related to the topic presented on the show. There appears to be support for this hypothesis (see Table 4). Overall, more than half (52%) of the "experts" who appeared on the television shows reviewed had written a book related to the topic being presented on the television show, and this book was identified and displayed during the show. Similarly, among the psychologists who appeared, 50% had written a book on the topic being presented on the show.

**Table 4. Percentage of "experts" who also authored a book subdivided by (1) all books written by all experts and (2) all books written by all psychologists.**

Show Title	(1)			(2)		
	Books	Experts	%	Books	Experts	%
20/20	8	8	100%	1	1	100%
48 Hours	0	4	0%	0	0	0%
60 Minutes	0	1	0%	0	0	0%
Donahue	7	18	39%	1	2	50%
Geraldo	16	22	73%	1	2	50%
Larry King Live	0	5	0%	0	0	50%
Oprah	14	22	67%	1	4	25%
Prime Time Live	0	7	0%	0	0	0%
Sally Jesse Raphael	9	24	38%	2	4	50%
Sonya Live	25	47	53%	3	5	60%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>50%</b>

### Conclusions and Implications

Psychologists were not strongly represented among "experts" on the talk shows and news magazine shows that featured psychological content; only 1 in 10 experts on these shows were identified as psychologists. Reasons for this seemingly low representation are unknown. One possible explanation is that there may be some hesitation on the part of psychologists to appear on television talk shows and even on news magazines because of the ethical duty to present information based on sound psychological literature and current practice standards (Principle

3.04, APA, 1992); with the rapid-fire, "keep the audience's attention" format of live television talk shows, thorough responses to the questions asked are not always possible. Even on news magazine shows, where the manner of presentation of information is often more scholarly than on talk shows, editing the interview by those who produce the show may cause a psychologist's remarks to be presented in a misleading or deceptive manner (e.g., statements presented out of context, statements lacking in depth due to editing). Because psychologists have an ethical responsibility to avoid false or deceptive statements (Principle 3.03, APA, 1992), to avoid having their work misused (Principle 1.16, APA, 1992), to prevent their influence from being misused (Principle 1.15, APA, 1992), and to correct any misuse or misrepresentation that occurs (Principle 1.16), appearing on a television or radio show carries a heavy responsibility. Thus, psychologists may hesitate about appearing in media where they have little control over the questions asked and the information presented in their responses.

If psychologists are not the people who are primarily represented as experts on television, then who is? The only criterion shared by a majority of "experts" who appeared on television was authorship of a book. Overall, there appeared to be a bias toward inviting those who had authored books available through the popular press to appear as an "expert" guest. While there is nothing wrong with writing a book and talking about the content of the book on television, the question of appropriate "expert" credentials arises. Most of the people who wrote books and appeared on the television shows reviewed presented credentials that supported their "expertness" other than having written a book. However, as shown earlier in Table 3, 13% of those who appeared had as their only stated credential, "I wrote a book on ...". Thus, it would be possible for someone to author a book without being an expert (as defined earlier) yet to be considered a solid source of information on the topic by the viewing public. This has a serious implication for the level of knowledge the public holds about a particular topic: if members of the viewing public do not critically analyze the information presented or question whether the source of the information is truly an expert, they may be misled into believing the information presented is the best information available and may make decisions based on this information that are detrimental to their well-being.

There is another serious implication for the level of knowledge the public holds about a particular topic that is based on the types of guests that appear on television talk shows and news magazines. While in a majority of cases (nearly 80%) someone of "expert" status was available to discuss the issue being presented, these experts were not the main focus of the show. Instead, one or more guests who had experience with the topic under discussion were the central focus. As pointed out earlier, just as a case study is not representative of the population under study, the personal experiences described by the guests who appeared are not representative of all people who experienced similar life events. Note that this statement is not meant to demean the value of people discussing their personal experiences; the knowledge that one is not alone in one's struggles (developing a sense of universality; Yalom, 1986) is central to working through difficulties. Instead, this statement is intended to again point out that if members of the viewing public take the information presented by people with certain life experiences as "fact" (without critically analyzing the information presented), the conclusions they draw and the decisions they make may not be made on the best information available. Going back to the earlier question of "If psychologists are not the people who are primarily represented as experts on television, then who is?", the answer seems to be "Someone who can say, "This happened to me." When psychological topics are addressed by people who are potentially seen by viewers as "experts" solely due to having experienced a life event, the level of psychological knowledge held by the public stands a good chance of being, at the least, incomplete.

Further analysis is being performed on these data focusing on the actual statements made by psychologists and other "experts" who appeared on television. In the case of psychologists, the goal is to assess the degree to which those psychologists who appeared on the shows under review adhered to the APA's Ethical Principles. While no quantitative conclusion can be

presented at this point regarding the statements made by the "experts" who appeared, one qualitative impression is clear. Most often, when presenting information in response to a question posed by the host, an audience member, or a viewer, the answers given by the "experts" who appear are somewhat pat; they tend to be reduced to simple statements and to not present alternative ideas. (Again, this is probably due to the rapid-fire, "keep the audience's attention" format of live television talk shows and to the editing process that takes place in producing news magazine shows.) A simulated example (based on an actual response by a mental health professional on a talk show) is as follows:

*Interviewer/Host: 'How did this person get this way?'*

*Expert: "Early childhood influences shape who we become. Personality is formed by the age of 5 or 6, and the characteristics that develop then are the ones we carry into adulthood."*

No alternative views are presented, and the conversation moves on. The danger in this type of presentation, and other "pat" answers presented by "experts" appearing on television, is the education of the public to expect psychologists and other mental health professionals to also provide quick and easy answers. When "experts" on television are seen as role models, consumers of mental health services who are influenced by these shows may look for mental health professionals to give the same types of "pat" answers given by the "experts" appearing on these shows. When these answers are not produced, the credibility of the service provider may be adversely affected.

In conclusion, psychologists are not well-represented on television talk shows and on television news magazines. Those people who do appear on these shows as "experts" are often introduced with sketchy credentials or given "expert" status by virtue of having experienced a particular life event. In terms of the information presented by these shows, advice to the consumer would be to critically analyze the information presented and seek alternative sources of information to supplement what has been presented.

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