Cultivation: Growth or Phenomenon?

Cultivation Theory since its Inception

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Abstract

Cultivate theory first proposed by Gerbner indicated that a slow and steady contribution was made by the television in viewers beliefs and perception of the world. Early cultivation studies produced a great deal of intense criticism, partly in response to these critiques various refinements were made to cultivation theory, including the notions of mainstreaming and resonance. The research expanded to investigate the cultivation of sex-role stereotypes, political orientations and behavior, images of aging, health-related beliefs and behaviors, opinions about science, attitudes toward marriage and the family, work, minorities, sexuality, the environment, religion, affluence, and numerous other issues. Cultivation research has been undertaken in over two dozen countries where scholars continue to expand the range and focus of cultivation theory and research in many different directions. This paper offers an assessment of some recent developments in cultivation starting from the theory itself and later expanding its effects to genre-specific cultivation, the fear of violence and cultivation effect along with the portrayals of homosexuals and African Americans as perceived by the theory. Each source listed through the paper has been discussed for accuracy, ending with a summary of the author’s views in relation to this paper and theory in general.
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Cultivation Theory since its Inception

The Beginning

Cultivation theory is an attempt to understand and explain the dynamics of television as a distinctive feature of the modern age. Cultivation theory is also known as cultivation hypothesis or cultivation analysis and was originally composed by George Gerbner and later expanded upon by Gerbner and Larry Gross in 1976 (Northup, 2010, p. 31). Research entitled “Cultural Indicators” began in the mid-1960s in which Gerbner and Gross endeavored to study media effects, specifically whether watching television influences the audiences’ idea and perception of everyday life, and if so, how?

Cultivation theory states that high frequency viewers of television dubbed ‘television types’ by Gerbner are more susceptible to media messages particularly of the violent kind and the belief that they are real and valid. Heavy viewers exposed to more violence are more prone to be affected by the Mean World Syndrome – “a cynical mindset of general mistrust of others subscribed to by heavy TV viewer” (Griffin, 2008, p. 353). As director of the Cultural Indicators Research project Gerbner came up with an index for violence which included physical abuse presented even in cartoon format but not limited to. The research concluded with significant proof spanning two decades that the portrayal of violence was remarkably stable yet high (Griffin, 2008, p. 350). This project further revealed that “people on the margins of American Society were put into a symbolic double jeopardy where their vulnerability to violence is overplayed and their existence is understated” (Griffin, 2008, p.354). In essence Gerbner reported that there was greater inequality in the age, race and gender of the people vulnerable to violence in TV.
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**Core Concepts of this Theory**

Gerbner suggested three distinctive areas of study and cultivation analysis is the third part of a research strategy planned to examine the role of the media in society. The first component *Institutional Process Analysis* investigates how media messages are accomplished, and circulated. The second component *Message System Analysis* examines images in broadcasting content. The third component *Cultivation Analysis* studies how exposure to the world of television contributes to conceptions that viewers have about the real world. This framework blended into the *Cultural Indicators* project - a far-ranging and long–lasting research project (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 338).

Cultivation theory in its most basic form, suggests that television is responsible for shaping, or ‘cultivating’ viewers’ conceptions of social reality. The combined effect of massive television exposure by viewers over time subtly shapes the perception of social reality for individuals. Gerbner put forth the view that television tends to cultivate middle-of-the-road political perspectives. He called this effect ‘mainstreaming’. Further, distinction led to two groups of television viewers: the heavy viewers and the light viewers. Gerbner focused on ‘heavy viewers’, those who put in four or more hours of television time, people he nicknamed ‘television types’ in favor of the more common ‘couch potato’. He concluded that people who watch a lot of television are likely to be more influenced by the ways in which the world is framed by television programs. These people tend to develop an overall cynical mindset that Gerbner attributed as the ‘Mean World Syndrome’ a result of the cultivation differential between the light and heavy viewers. Cultivation Differential as discovered by Gerbner “is the percentage giving the television answer within comparable groups of light and heavy viewers” (Griffin, 2008,
p. 354). He also describes ‘Resonance’ as the intensified effect on the audience when what people see on television is what they have experienced in life. This double dose tends to amplify the cultivation effect says Gerbner.

**Development of Cultivation Theory**

“While the foundations of cultivation research only considered the correlations between overall television use and responses to ‘real world’ questions, there has been a great deal of refinement in the understanding of what can mediate cultivation effects” (Northup, 2010, p. 32). Hawkins and Pingree in 1980 expanded on by considering the different genres and how different programs might influence a certain individual more than it might others. In short they tried to look at the learning processes involved. This has since been a popular approach by many theorists like Rubin, Perse and Taylor in 1988 and Weimann and Cohan in 2000 to name a few (Northup, 2010, p.32). Hawkins and Pingree also examined the relationship of cultivation under a variety of social and psychological conditions and attempting to tie cultivation more directly to individual types of television content. Their research focused on” demographic conditions like age and viewing habits and psychological conditions that included cognitive ability and perception of television reality”. The results of their research indicated that “age or cognitive ability determined cultivation” (Hawkins & Pingree, 1980; Northup, 2010, p.32).

**Genre – Specific Cultivation**

Cultivations theorists originally researched the effects of viewing television in general without any differential analysis on specific types of viewing. Though it can be argued whether genre-specific effects can be called cultivation; there is reason to believe
that the effects are similar. For example, a program like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* often depicts a need for collective support and heavy viewers of this show tended “to be supportive of activist and interventionist government policies in support of families” (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p. 341). The study by Glynn, Huge, Reineke, Hardy and Shanahan in 2007 also confirmed the hypothesis that conservative viewers of this type of show tended to be supportive of such policies much more than they otherwise would have been (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p. 341).

Kubic and Chory in 2007 found that exposure to make-over programs related to low self-esteem and a drive to be perfect in their viewers. Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, and Smith, also in 2007, examined reality dating shows and concluded that young male heavy viewers were inclined to develop a very stereotypical view on dating like “dating is a game and women are sex objects”. Other studies on a single show have also been conducted like *Grey’s Anatomy* that developed the notion that doctors were courageous which tended to manifest higher patient satisfaction (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p.341).

**Fear of Crime**

Fear of crime is central to cultivation theory as proposed by Gerbner and other theorists have followed a similar pattern only to have slight variations in their results. These studies primarily included genre-specific programs. Cultivation was found to be relatively low for a televised crime show but it increased for reality crime shows.

Considerable research by Romer, Jamieson, and Aday in 2003 applied cultivation to local news, where the fear of crime was independent of the local crime rates. “There is a heightened perception of crime risk on both personal and societal levels with
exaggerated insights on juvenile crime rates as well” (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p.341). Local and national news viewing combined predicts fear of crime, and support for capital punishment and handgun concluded Holbert, Shah, & Kwak in 2004. Viewing reality police shows also produced similar patterns, which included not only greater fear of crime but also lower levels of social trust (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p.341).

Despite these genre-specific patterns, some studies continue to find associations between overall viewing and fear of crime. For example, “Van den Bulck in 2004 found that overall viewing predicted fear of victimization, and that it was a better predictor of fear than actual experience with crime”. Busselle in 2003 found that parents who watch more programs portraying crime and violence are more likely to warn their children about crime during their high school years; these warnings, in turn, predict the students’ own crime estimates. “This implies that cultivation may take place though both direct and indirect processes” (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p. 342).

All of this research lead to but one conclusion that fear of crime in television viewing whatever the kind, be it overall viewing or genre-specific or the local news, had to be taken seriously.

**Minority Group in Cultivation**

Portrayal of minority groups is also frequently examined as a cultural indictor and case studies note that television reflects the changing societal images in regards to the minority groups. For example the depiction of African Americans has changed markedly from the early 1950s to the 1990’s where they have acquired more prominent roles. Keeping this portrayal in one hand let’s move on to the portrayal of homosexuals in today’s television, which has increased quite a bit. For example, *Queer eye for the*
*straight guy* is a popular NBS line-up and *The L word* in Showtime is another such example where the content focuses on lesbians. While scholars like Shugart argue that “mediated representations of homosexuality remain consistent with a social paradigm in which heterosexuality is the norm”, the author of this article James Shanahan states that there is a positive and increasing depiction of homosexuals in today’s TV (Shanahan, 2004, p. 290). Shanahan also quantified that though it seemed apparent that television was not responsible for the social change, it was plausible to say that television picked up on new content when homosexuals crossed the border or permissibility.

The role of cultivation in this entire process should reflect resilient social change in heavy viewers. But research by Shanahan (2004) does not conclusively prove this point. When homosexuals were viewed as a minority and social outcasts they became the victims of television drama, and heavy viewers perceived them as such more often having a negative outlook on such a group. As the portrayal of this minority group took on a new light in television so should the opinions about them say Shanahan (2004), when in actuality it does not. Though there are more acceptances of homosexuals, it still does not reflect heavy viewers as the strongest advocates of homosexuality. This is probably due to the over-representation of the group with its new found novelty Shanahan hypothesized.

To conclude on Shanahan article, there is a marked difference in the portrayals of minorities vs. violence because he perceives violence as a constant which requires more sophisticated thinking.
Racism and Cultivation theory

Newscast had millions of viewers riveted to the screen, and they inevitably include a number of crime reports. These crime stories most often than not include the portrayal of African-American as criminals than most Caucasians. Within the Cultivation theory’s framework, paying keen attention to the relationship between television usage, news media usage and the attitude towards African –Americans, the results suggest that heavy news media users tend to develop a strong negative implicit attitude towards African-Americans. This study by Northup concludes that news media usage exerts an apparent control over the overall outlook of persons portrayed and in this case the portrayal of African-Americans (2010, p. 29). Though it can be argued that the type of media consumed does not matter as much as the amount of it, this article by Northup lends an insight into her research that Hawkins and Pingree where right in their assessment that genre is a much more important consideration.

In conclusion Northup ended her article with the warning that influencing the viewer’s mindset on a certain race might influence the justice system in the long run, stating that new users might get biased in their viewpoints on result of overexposure to TV. She bids caution to newscasters on the potential negativity of stereotyping that may occur among news consumers because of their programming practices.

Other Recent Findings

A variety of studies have expanded cultivation research and updated areas of earlier work to reflect notable changes in media messages. According to the frequent portrayals of drug usage on television Minnebo and Eggermont, in 2007 surveyed and found that heavy viewers were more likely to believe that most young people are
substance users. Closer analysis revealed that the effects of education were diminished among heavier viewers—a pattern that is a hallmark of mainstreaming (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p.345). Cultivation studies of gender and family roles continue to show that “television contributes to traditional images and aspirations, despite the massive social changes that took place in women’s roles in recent decades” (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p.346). This grain follows along in the romance and marriage viewpoints of the television types as well. They tend to hold idealistic expectations regarding romance and marriage. Their romanticized views enable them to believe that marriages will last forever, say Sargin and Nabi in 2002 (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p.346).

Ward also found a pattern to prime time shows. Greater viewing of prime time shows, comedies, dramas and music videos etc. was associated with the acceptance of sexual stereotypes. Moving on to environment and cultivation, a considerable amount of recent cultivation research focused on perceptions of science and the environment, building on the “early findings that television viewing cultivated a sense that scientists are strange, and that science is potentially dangerous and always on the verge of running out of control” (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p.346). “Other recent work continued to examine methodological issues, such as question format by Hetsroni, the dependent variables and topics analyzed and new ways to think about the relationship between TV-world and real-world estimates” (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p.346).

This brings us to speculation about the future of cultivation. Technology is taking a super-fast track and television is a never ending society, in light of this the earlier criticisms that cultivation did not account for viewer activity or for new forms of media
and for greater diversity of channels and messages, have taken on more force. Cultivation in the world of Facebook, Twitter, Netflix, YouTube and Hulu take on new meanings. Morgan and Shanahan (2010) say that the need to pay attention to their common messages and lessons has become urgent. As long as there are popular storytelling systems and purveyors of widely shared messages, Gerbner’s main ideas are likely to persist.

Source Credibility

Each source’s credibility and accountability is called into question as we run through this paper and this section endeavors to do just that. Each source has been accessed to ensure reliability in the information provided. Sources like The Journal of Communication endeavor to provide information that has been published and reviewed for accuracy of information, they often contain articles and publications by reverent author in the recommended field of study.


Em Griffin named Professor Emeritus of Communications at Wheaton College in Illinois, taught this field of study for more than 35 years. His work published by McGraw Hill is on its seventh edition and is considered a leading work in the field of communications and is being widely used by instructor and students alike as a reference into this world of theories.

Michael Morgan got his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania, while James Shanahan received his from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Morgan is a professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and Shanahan is a professor in the College of Communication at Boston University. Their common research interests include cultivation analysis and media effects. Their combined efforts published in the Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media is about the state of cultivation from its inception to what the future might hold for this theory. This scholarly journal is published quarterly by the Broadcast Education Association and is considered to be one of the leading publications in the field of Communications. The Journal contains timely articles about new developments, trends and research in electronic media written by academicians, researchers and other electronic media professionals (BEA).


Temple Northup is a graduate student in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Her research paper is about the implicit and explicit perception of viewers as aided by the news media. Her article has been published in the Southwestern Mass Communication Journal. Though a student paper her research has credibility and lot of information flow. Her approach is consistent and adapts to the limitation regarding the choice of her research group – students who seldom watch local news. In spite of this
being common for most research she agrees that college population does not watch news compared to what they would in a few years’ time. The Southwestern Mass Communication Journal provides a forum for scholars in the Southwestern region of the United States to publish reports of original research or discussion on a wide variety of topics and issues relevant to mass communication. This journal is published twice each year by the Southwest Education Council for Journalism and Mass Communication (Sage Journal).


James Shanahan attained his Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and is a professor in the College of Communication at Boston University. His research interests include Cultural Indicators, cultivation, media effects, and communication about science and the environment (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p.337). His article published in the European Journal of Communication is primarily based on the issues regarding the representation of certain groups and television programs as cultural indicators. This publication consisting of communication research and theory in all its diversity, seeks to reflect and embolden the variety of scholarly traditions in the field and to endorse the exchange of ideas between them (Sage Journal, 2011). Published quarterly, this is addressed to a global scholarly community. It is rigorously peer-reviewed and it publishes the best of research on communications and media (Sage Journal).
Conclusion

Cultivation Theory in all its facets is a shock even to the educated mind. Muddled with shared media messages, cultivation theory and its journey through every nook and corner of human perception of societal norms comes as a constant surprise as one goes through this paper. In its entirety this paper brushes peripherally all that is cultivation. Dug deeper this never ending pond will produces its voluminous knowledge, no doubt. Cultivation in light of new age media messages through online social groups will be something to look forward to in the future. In spite of everything that is new, it is safe to say that television will always be our primary story teller for some time to come.
References


