

Cultivation Theory

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Cultivation theory is a social theory which examined the long-term effects of television on American audiences of all ages. Developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross of the University of Pennsylvania, cultivation theory derived from several large-scale research projects as part of an overall research project entitled 'Cultural Indicators'. The purpose of the Cultural Indicators project was to identify and track the 'cultivated' effects of television on viewers. They were "concerned with the effects of television programming (particularly violent programming) on the attitudes and behaviors of the American public" (Miller, 2005, p. 281).

Gerbner and Stephen Mirirai (1976) assert that the overall concern about the effects of television on audiences stemmed from the unprecedented centrality of television in American culture. They posited that television as a mass medium of communication had formed in to a common symbolic environment that bound diverse communities together, socializing people in to standardized roles and behaviours. They compared the power of television to the power of religion, saying that television was to modern society what religion once was in earlier times.

Definition

According to Miller (2005: 282), cultivation theory was not developed to study "targeted and specific effects (e.g., that watching Superman will lead children to attempt to fly by jumping out the window) in terms of the cumulative and overarching impact has on the way we see the world in which we live". Hence the term 'Cultivation Analysis'.

Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli (1986) argued that while religion or education had previously been greater influences on social trends and mores, now "television is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history...Television cultivates from infancy the very predispositions and preferences that used to be acquired from other primary sources ... The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of a common symbolic environment" (pp. 17 - 18).

Cultivation theory in its most basic form, then, suggests that exposure to television, over time, subtly "cultivates" viewers' perceptions of reality. This cultivation can have an impact even on light viewers of TV, because the impact on heavy viewers has an impact on our entire culture. Gerbner and Gross (1976) say "television is a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviors. Its function is in a word, enculturation" (p. 175).

Stated most simply, the central hypothesis explored in cultivation research is that those who spend more time watching television are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the television world, compared with people who watch less television, but are otherwise comparable in terms of important demographic characteristics (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002).

Gerbner et al. (1986) go on to argue the impact of television on its viewers is not unidirectional, that the "use of the term cultivation for television's contribution to conception of social reality... (does not) necessarily imply a one-way, monolithic process. The effects of a pervasive medium upon the composition and structure of the symbolic environment are subtle, complex, and intermingled with other influences. This perspective, therefore, assumes an interaction between the medium and its publics" (p. 23).

Cultivation Theory (George Gerbner, 1960's) is a top down, linear, closed communication model.

In 1968 Gerbner conducted a survey to demonstrate this theory. From his results he placed television viewers into three categories; light viewers (less than 2 hours a day), medium viewers (2-4 hours a day) and heavy viewers (more than 4 hours a day). He found that heavy viewers held beliefs and opinions similar to those portrayed on television rather than the real world which demonstrates the compound effect of media influence.

An advantage to this study is that surveys are able to ask specific detailed questions and can be applied over different demographic groups. Disadvantages to this study is that survey questions can be interpreted incorrectly resulting in inaccurate answers and that participants of the survey may or may not be doing the survey voluntarily which could influence how they respond to the survey and the type of people being surveyed.

Gerbner created the cultivation theory as one part of a three part research strategy, called Cultural Indicators. The concept of a cultural "indicator" was developed by Gerbner in order to be a more common idea of a social indicator. The first part of this strategy is known as the institutional process analysis. This investigates how the flow of media messages is produced and managed, how decisions are made, and how media organizations function. Ultimately, is asked: What are the processes, pressures, and constraints, that influence and underline the production of mass media content? The second part of this strategy is known as message system analysis, which has been used since 1967 to track the most stable and recurrent images in media content. This is in terms of violence, race & ethnicity, gender, and occupation. It asked: What are the dominant patterns of images, messages, and facts, values and lessons, expressed in media messages? The final part of the research study is the cultivation analysis. This asked: What is the relationship between attention to these messages and audiences' conceptions of social reality? (Morgan, p. 70) and (Shanahan and Morgan p. 6 -7).