

# Cultivation Theory

Recently, television has been playing a huge role in the life of the everyday American and still continues to do so. Although both the saturation and viewing time of television are high, these elements are continuously increasing (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). The television audience is viewing so much content, and a lot of it is resonating, but there is not much agreement about the role that television plays in the lives of its audience.

For these reasons, George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorelli conducted a research project entitled *cultivation analysis* to study the implications of television (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). There had been very little research on the processes of cultivation effects prior to 1980. (Shrum, 2007). The premise of the cultivation theory is to explain how, over time, television viewers “cultivate” their understanding of the world based on what they are watching on television. Ultimately, the intention of the cultivation theory is to understand and explain the active forces of television as a “prominent feature of our age” (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986).

As it was originally conceived by Gerbner and his colleagues, the cultivation theory had many strengths and weaknesses. The strengths of this theory are prominent and distinguishable. The research that was conducted in this case has been described as being groundbreaking (Shrum, 2007). A theory like this was the first of its kind. It is very useful in the studying the influences that television have on the public and the public’s opinion. Not only is this theory greatly significant in the study of media effects, it is also one of the vital theories of media effects (Cultivation Theory, 2010). Additional research has been continually branching off of this study and leading to new findings ever since this study was originally published in the 1980’s. In addition to being one of the three most cited theories in mass communication, research related to the cultivation theory has been cited and published all over the world. The cultivation theory has

also been expanded cultivation research to brand new areas (Morgan, M., Shanahan, J., & Signorielli, N.).

With the considerable strengths of this study, there comes a few weaknesses. I am going to touch on four specific weaknesses that are relatively prominent in this study. There are a few problems that Potter (1993) introduces that have to do with the “conceptualization of cultivation indicators”, the first being related to the television world answer (Potter, 1993). A television world answer is the answer (to a question) that a person should, hypothetically, give if they were cultivated by television. The more cultivated a person is the more likely they are to answer with a television world answer. He argues that although the television world is portrayed as a mean and violent place, viewers should be able to tell the difference between the television world and the real world. In addition, it is much less about the violent acts themselves and more about the way that those violent acts are portrayed. Most violent acts are committed by “heroes”. “From this we can conclude that heavier viewing should lead to feelings of aggressive power and righteousness” (Potter, 1993).

The second weakness of cultivation theory has to do with the conceptualization of television exposure. Television viewing should not simply be examined in terms of hours viewed but more in terms of the content that is being viewed. Potter (1993) explains the perfect example of the dominance of television. For example, if person A watches 45 hours of television a week, and person B watches 15 hours of television a week, then cultivation theory would say that person B would be less likely to give “television world answers” than person A, because their life is much less controlled by television. But if person A is watching the Family Channel and Food Network while person B is watching C-Span, documentaries, and crime shows, then person B should have a higher “fear score” than person A (Potter, 1993). Television viewing is being

looked at in the sense of how frequently audiences are viewing, instead of what kind of content is being viewed. If this research were to be split up by who is watching what genres of television, different results may have been yielded.

The role of third variables isn't explained as thoroughly as it should be, and that is where the third weakness of this theory arises. It is possible that the audience's views may not have been an effect of cultivation, but other outside factors. Nature and culture both play an enormous role in the development of a person. Just because a person's beliefs may align with the cultivation theory does not mean that those beliefs were a direct result of television. They could have been learned from other factors, including the upbringing, experiences, and education of the viewer (Potter, 1993).

The final weakness of this theory reflects on response latencies. Response latencies refer to how fast someone responds to something. Most of these tests revolve around respondents answering a simple question, likely a question that can be answered in three words or less. The problem is that "these responses do not translate well into the typical measures used in cultivation theory" (Shrum, 2007). Shrum recommends that there should be no more than five response categories. He says this because five category response measures work well for most attitudes (Shrum, 2007). For example, when asking a question, a zero to five scale should be used in lieu of a zero to ten scale (An example of a question that uses this scales would be: How trustworthy do you think most people are, one being not trustworthy at all and five being completely trustworthy). This is because it will take people more time if they have more options to choose from. This method was used in the original cultivation theory and Shrum views this as one of the weaknesses of the theory.

Numerous important suggestions are made in *Cultivation Theory and Research: A Conceptual Critique*. A lot of these tie directly in to the weaknesses of the theory that I have described previously.

The first important suggestion that Potter (1993) makes relates to Gerbner's idea of non-selective viewing as a whole. Potter (1993) states that the television exposure variable. Different results were found when different genres of television were studied. For example, heavier viewers of crime television shows were more likely to approve of things like police brutality. Heavier pornography viewers are more likely to take part in sexuality stereotyping and heavy viewers of soap operas overestimated the amount of doctors, and lawyers in males and females (Potter, 1993). Potter's ultimate suggestion is that the television exposure variable needs to be completely reevaluated.

The next suggestion made has a direct affiliation with non-selective viewing. Currently, the cultivation theory states that the person who watches the most television is the most cultivated. "The differences among exposure types and not to be just the amount of total viewing in contrast to non-viewing" (Potter, 1993). Basically, it is more about what is being watched and less about how much is being watched, and this concept as a whole needs to be reevaluated. The suggestion being proposed here is that the idea of dominance needs to be expanded.

Third variables are another topic in which Potter (1993) proposes a suggestion to improve upon the original theory. Third variables are things such as gender, age, education level, etc., as I mentioned above. These things are thought to be related to both television exposure and perceptions of cultivation indicators (Potter, 1993). In the original cultivation theory, these elements were not incorporated. Potter (1993) creates two very sound methods to "treat" third variables. The first is control variables, and these can be mathematically controlled. He uses the

mean world belief as an example. He states that people in high crime neighborhoods are more likely to watch a lot of television and in turn they are more likely to have these mean world beliefs that Gerbner talks about. He states this, “explains both television exposure and the cultivation indicator, and its influence should be removed in the computations so that we can more clearly assess the direct relationship between exposure and the cultivation indicator” (Potter, 1993). The second approach to third variables is to compare across groups. He uses the example that if the cultivation relationship is strong in suburban neighborhoods compared to urban neighborhoods, we know that the kind of neighborhood is a very important contingent variable because it breaks up the sample and “reveals that the cultivation relationship differs across certain groups” (Potter, 1993).

For any scientific theory, it is necessary that it be evaluated in terms of the social scientific criteria for theory evaluation. I will do so by touching on all of these qualifications separately, which include the theory being: descriptive, predictive, testable, parsimonious, having utility and being heuristically provocative.

For the most part, Gerbner and his colleagues (1986) describe all variables in their certain domains thoroughly in terms of social scientific criteria. However there is one portion of his theory that doesn't. As I touched on earlier, the cultivation theory doesn't expand on third variables as much as it should. In Potter's (1993) writing, he suggests ways to “treat” the problem of third variables. The cultivation theory falls short in including all third variables that could affect the results of the theory. Along with being descriptive the cultivation theory is also parsimonious, but similar to the descriptive qualities of this theory, there are some places where the parsimoniousness falls short. As mentioned previously, third variables. This is an area where

Gerbner (1986) isn't as parsimonious as he should be, all of the possible variables aren't analyzed in this case.

Many elements of Gerbner's (1986) theory have predictive qualities. The theory as a whole is predicting that the stronger the relationship someone has with watching television the more their cultivated their perceptions and beliefs will be (Potter, 1993). Basically, the more television you watch, the more cultivated you will be. This theory is stating how the variables and elements of television work together to make the audience become cultivated. A specific predictive theory would be the theory of mainstreaming. This theory says that television has the power to override different behaviors that develop from other influences or factors, for example demographic or cultural influences (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). Essentially, television has the power to homogenize its audience. This is an example of Gerbner predicting how factors will work together and what their contributions will be.

Gerbner's (1986) cultivation theory was testable. A lot of this testing was done via survey. In the first reading, Gerbner specifically mentions that surveys are used to determine the amount of television watched by people who lead different lifestyles as well as the differences in heavy and light television viewer's response patterns, among other things. In first reading itself Gerbner states, "We use large surveys that were conducted for other purposes, with the accompanying advantages and limitation of secondary analysis" (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). It is clear that the use of surveys have advantages as well as disadvantages. An advantage of surveys is the broad range of people that the surveys reached especially over different demographics. In addition surveys allow detailed questions to be asked. The disadvantages to surveys are considerable. Survey questions can be interpreted incorrectly by survey takers and this could result in inaccurate answers. In addition, you know what someone

answered, but not why they answered the way they did (S, 2010). In conclusion, although Gerbner's theory was testable, a lot of the testing wasn't done using the most sound of practices.

The purpose of cultivation theory revolves around its utility. Gebner (1986) does a great job of describing this himself. He summarizes his theory by stating that the cultivation theory was tested in order to explain the characteristics of television and the affect that it can have on an audience. He continues by stating, "Understanding its dynamics can help develop and maintain a sense of alternatives and independence essential for self-direction and self-government in the television age" (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). This theory was created to inform the audience of what happens when a certain amount of television is watched, and promote self-direction and self-government as a way to combat these effects. This theory has practical value and unquestionably has a social benefit.

It is clear that the cultivation theory is heuristically provocative. As I stated previously, this theory has been useful in studying the theory of media effects. It is also one of the three most cited theories in mass communication. Because of this data, it is clear that a lot of people talk about this theory. In addition, there has been many written critiques of this theory, including the two critiques that were assigned for this paper. Through this we know that many people are wanting to test this theory.

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