Cultivation theory and criticisms

Cultivation theory

1. Developed by George Gerbner, Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania.
2. He began the ‘Cultural Indicators’ research project in the mid-1960s, to study whether and how watching television could influence viewers’ ideas of what the everyday world is like.
3. Cultivation theorists argue that television has long-term effects which are small, gradual and indirect but cumulative and significant.
4. And states that the more time people live in the television world, the more likely they are to believe the social reality portrayed on television.

Ideas

1. They argue that heavy viewing leads viewers to have more homogenous or convergent opinions than light viewers.
2. So it focuses on effects—particularly the long term effects which are small, gradual, indirect and, they argue, cumulative.

Assumptions

1. Television is a medium of socialisation and socialises us in terms of behaviour and attitudes.

Focus of cultivation theory

1. The most well-known example in relation to cultivation theory is that relating to violence and images of violence.
2. Often associating heavy viewing experiences with personal beliefs about the world.

Sense of reality

1. It is the overall patterns of settings, actions, and the television environment which may cultivate a stable and perceived ‘common sense’ conception of reality.

Orders

1. First order effects are general beliefs about the everyday world such as the prevalence of violence.
2. First order cultivation is about beliefs about the state of the world.
3. Whilst second order effects are about specific attitudes to things such as law and order, or personal safety.
4. Second order cultivation refers to attitudes or feelings about the world.
Criticisms

1. The active/passive question is misleading.
2. It is focused on a false understanding of passive/active
3. Active tends to be referred to as very active – interpreting, critically analysing what one is watching, or very passive – aligned with the magic bullet idea
4. But, in reality, both types of viewers are imaginary
5. For example, when we become lost in a story, it is a highly active process
6. So actually we can question the terms active and passive to begin with.

UK television

1. The theory did not seem to work when applied to UK television
2. Which Gerbner suggested was due to differences between UK and US television

Other criticisms

1. One criticism is that viewers with pre-existing characteristics may choose to watch certain genres - Such as crime or violence
2. For example, a more fearful people may be drawn to watching more television than other people.

Other factors

1. There are other media, other people, life experiences and the environment as well as the family - Which may all influence how one responds to television
2. This includes other media – as well as genres within television.
3. And of course – this includes YouTube videos and social media – so again it is hard to see how we can talk of effects to a general population

Constructing reality

1. Other studies suggest that sometimes heavy viewing may not influence a person’s social construction of behaviour or world view
2. Viewers also may not interpret what they see on television as real
3. It is very difficult to prove a causal relationship exists
4. Finally, we may not go to television to find out about social realities – especially if we know what we are watching is fiction.
5. We still need to acknowledge, though that television may influence – just maybe not in the direct way that cultivation theories suggest.