Who is in Prison Anyway? Examining how perceptions of the incarcerated are cultivated

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COM 550: Capstone

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August 9th, 2020

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine if cultivation theory and its suggestion that society cultivates ideals of a mean world because of heavy exposure to violent media, pertains to those already incarcerated. Adults, 18 and over, living in the United States (*n=307*) completed a survey that measured empathetic and apathetic views of the incarcerated through the viewing of positive and negative portrayals of incarceration. Results indicated that viewer's empathy was significantly higher when viewers watched positive portrayals of incarceration than when they watched negative portrayals. Correlation between age and empathic views was tested. No correlation was found between empathy for positive portrayals of the incarcerated, and the age of the viewer. However, there was a significant negative, albeit weak, relationship between age and empathy toward character in negative portrayals of incarceration. Implications of the findings specifically examining potential for future research and practical applications to destigmatize incarceration are discussed.

Keywords: incarceration, crime and criminals, cultivation theory, empathy for central characters, quantitative analysis

Who is in Prison Anyway? Examining How Perceptions of the Incarcerated Are Cultivated

A prisoner stands before their parole board waiting for a decision. Regardless of who they are or what they did, the word prisoner creates a mental image of their likeness. While Black, Latino, and Native men make up the majority of the prison population there are other influences at play that assist in the creation of a mental image of who the incarcerated are (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). Despite lesser offending crimes making up the majority of those in prison (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019); images of minority, tattooed, gang affiliated men serving time for violent crime hold prevalence in public perception (Madriz, 1997). The American criminal justice system presently holds 2.3 million people in the entire carceral system (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). Not all of those 2.3 million people are male, minorities, gang affiliated, or serving sentences for violent crimes, so why does this representation of the American prisoner continue to perpetuate? According to the first quarter 2019, Neilson ratings, the average American spends nearly six hours a day watching television (Neilson, 2019). Shows like *Prison Break, Oz, Wentworth, Locked Up*, crime dramas like *NYPD Blue, Chicago P.D.,* and *Law & Order*, not to mention US local and national news sensationalize violent crime and criminals, and reinforce the aforementioned ideas of prisoners in society.

Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorelli (1980), noticed a trend as television began to rise in cultural prevalence. Television, and the ideals set within the programming society watched, held influence over viewers' beliefs and values. The examination of this influence, labeled Cultivation Theory or the Cultivation Effect (Gerbner et al., 1980: Gerbner 1998) has become the cornerstone of examining how values, stories, and the impressions society collects through what they watch, shape their belief about the world. This theory examines the extent by which society incorporates television "facts" into their construction of reality, broken down into three general

facets: the mean world, the just world, and the altruistic world (Gerbner et al., 1980; Gerbner 1998). The mean world, specifically, examines how programs involving the reporting of crime—such as the nightly news, or crime dramas—affect society's inherent belief in their personal safety, their view on crimes and criminals, and the justice system in general (Gerbner et al., 1980; Gerbner, 1998).

Past research has focused heavily on content analysis, with limited studies utilizing quantitative research. Those studies broke down into three facets: longitudinal impact research—how cultivation impacts perceptions over time (Harmon, 2019; Yang & Oliver, 2010), research focusing on race portrayal (Dixon, et al., 2003; Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Parrot & Parrot, 2015), and examination of the criminal justice system and how it is represented on television (Dixon, 2007; Escholz et al., 2004; Goidel et al., 2003; Romer et al., 2003). However, quantitative studies focusing on how society cultivates beliefs of crime and criminals and its impact on perceptions of the incarcerated have not been done. Research has suggested that cultivated mean world beliefs influence opinions of the criminal justice system in regard to the severity of punishment (Cecil, 2019; Goidel et al., 2006; Mutz & Nir, 2010), the acceptance of capital punishment (Bilandzic et al.,2019; Cecil, 2019), and general feelings of safety after the "bad guy" has been put away (Nabi & Sullivan, 2001; Pickett & Gertz, 2015; Romer et al., 2003). What happens to those mean world beliefs once the "bad guy" is incarcerated? How do these cultivated ideals impact the presently incarcerated, and influence beliefs on if they can successfully re-enter society?

Critics of Cultivation Theory believe that too much focus has been spent examining media at the micro level—examining a specific genre or applying content analysis to a singular type of show, instead of examining television as a medium at the macro level (Potter, 2004;

Riddle et al., 2011). Television has evolved significantly since Gerbner and his colleagues (1980)

put forth their theory, considering at the time of their publication, television consisted of only a

handful of channels. Today, television programming is accessed on a multitude of platforms

from streaming platforms like Netflix and Hulu, apps such as Disney+, as well as traditional

cable and local channels. Media in its entirety—television, streaming services, film, and the

news—need to all be included when considering cultivation. Therefore, the purpose of this study

is to examine media as a macro level of influence examining all facets of media (local, cable, and

streaming services, movies, news programming and film). This macro viewpoint will show how

cultivated ideals have negatively impacted societal opinions on the incarcerated based upon

exposure to high or low empathy programming.

Literature Review

Topics within the literature review will be examined in four facets: the role of the media,

how victimization and fear influence cultivation, the representation of race in crime, and how

cultivated ideals impact the criminal justice system. From these affected areas, and with the body

of research already produced, the next logical question should ask how cultivation impacts the

2.3 million people serving prison sentences (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). Little research has been

done within the communication field pertaining specifically to how cultivation theory impacts

opinions of the incarcerated. The literature review will help identify gaps in the research and

inform the study of the cultivation of ideals as they pertain to criminals with the intent to

examine of the cultivation of ideals surrounding the incarcerated.

The Role of Media in the Cultivation of Mean World Beliefs

Gerbner et al. (1980) likened television to a religion, providing society with mores and

vales. However, television specifically is much more complex. With a multitude of

conglomerates providing an unending number of channels on local and cable devices, streaming services, and now apps dedicated to network programming, television truly has become the primary storyteller (Morgan, Shannahan & Signorelli, 2009). When the influence of television combines with film, news, and social media, media at the macro level exerts a level of influence that is just beginning to be explored.

In regard to the incarcerated, media has controlled the narrative of what it means to be a criminal since the invention of the medium (Cecil, 2017; Escholz et al., 2003; Madriz, 1997; Mastro & Robinson, 2000). With an overrepresentation of domineering, gang-affiliated, people of color throughout media from the news to television dramas, society has been inundated with violent images that hinder society's ability to understand the struggle of incarceration. Such images restrict viewer's capacity for empathy, as they are only being fed one-sided images that ignore the struggle of what it means to be incarcerated (Mutz & Nir, 2010).

If media acts as the introduction to unfamiliar experiences and provides insight into situations they would otherwise not be exposed to, how are those insights manipulated in a culture that values ratings over journalistic truth? Accurate representation of the real world does not drive the decisions of new providers, instead editors choose stories that are likely to draw audiences in for the longest period of time (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Exposure to crime stories, especially with regard to local news, increases the salience of crime independent of actual trends (Romer et al., 2003), and typically focuses on the most violent crimes (Goidel et al, 2006). Similarly, the perpetuation of people of color as perpetrators of crime, especially violent crime, also increases salience independent of trends. Many researchers believe this is due to incognizant racism (Dixon et al., 2003; Dixon & Williams, 2015; Dixon, 2007; Dixon, 2008). Incognizant

racism is the over-reporting of crimes by people of color as influenced by stereotypical bias (Dixon & Williams, 2015).

There is a link between the amount of exposure a viewer has to emotionally intense or violent media, and the impact on their cultivation of mean world ideals (Riddle et al.,2011). If new programming is how society shapes opinions about issues they are not familiar with, they not only are informing society, but influencing how those opinions are shaped (Cecil, 2019). With relation to crime and criminals and the cultivation of these mean world ideals, if a viewer is exposed to particularly violent or upsetting media featuring criminals or criminal acts, it will have a higher rate of resonance, and therefore a higher likelihood to reinforce mean world ideals (Riddle et al., 2011).

The Cultivation of Fear of Victimization

Within the constraints of media, the easiest target to cultivate a fear of victimization is women, who are shown being victimized in the worst ways on television (Goidel et al., 2006; Riddle et al. 2011). In the media women are raped, kidnapped and murdered at the hands of anonymous—typically Black or Latino—perpetrators, despite statistics indicating most violent crime against women are done by family members, friends/known associates, or domestic partners (Dixon et al., 2003; Dixon, 2007; Madriz, 1997, Parrott & Parrott, 2015). After females, the elderly are also the frequent victims in dramatized crime. Baby boomers—the most dominant viewing group for news and public affairs programming—are also the most likely to cultivate beliefs about an unsafe world (Holbert et al., 2004) stereotype criminals as minorities and poor (Madriz, 1997), and believe crime is committed by an individual gone bad and not a reflection of broader societal issues (Goidel et al., 2006). With this type of stigma continually perpetuated in the media, the chance for the incarcerated and recently paroled to be redeemed in the eyes of

society is slim. Especially when this type of stigma has detrimental impact on fair trials, redemption and successful re-entry (Holbert et al, 2006, Mutz & Nir, 2010).

The Cultivation of Racial Bias in Crime Drama

While people of color (Black, Latino/a, and Native) make up only 29% of the U.S. population, they represent over 58% of the national incarcerated population (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). While many variables contribute to this inflated rate of incarceration, cultivation of racial bias and stereotyping contributes to harsher sentences, less chance for parole, and a higher risk of recidivating (Crime and Justice Alliance, 2018). Racial representation on crime dramas is critical to the way in which audience perceive individuals in the real world; further asserting the link to modern racism (Entman, 1992). Portrayals of minorities on television are especially problematic because of their significant divergence from reality and the distorted exaggeration of the racialized nature of crime (Escholz et al., 2004). This exaggeration is exacerbated further through disproportional uses of minorities in criminal imagery—such as in stock photo mug shots, or featured as the perpetrators in "stranger victims" (crimes against people they don't know) dramatized news reports (Dixon & Williams, 2014; Escholz et al., 2004; Mastro & Robinson, 2000). Usage of this imagery reinforces the mentality that minorities—particularly Black and Latino males—are a symbol of menace and activate white fear (Dixon & Williams, 2014; Escholz et al., 2004).

Roche, Pickett and Gertz (2016) attribute two ideas as to why we receive and retain media images and integrate them into our construction of reality. The first, affinity hypothesis, believes that cultivation is strongest when reinforcing already held beliefs (Roche et al., 2016). The second theory, the vulnerability hypothesis, believes cultivation activates with those who feel most vulnerable to crime (Roche et al., 2016). Therefore, when women and the elderly are

continually fed images that threaten their safety and well-being cultivation not only occurs but has a higher level of resonance. These notions, affirmed by the portrayal of minorities as the menace in the media, cultivate biased beliefs that negatively impact how criminals of color will be treated, remanded, and released.

The Impact of Cultivation on the Criminal Justice System

Despite the 2,139,000 people serving time in federal, state, local and native facilities (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019), most Americans do not have direct experience with crime and the justice system and depend on the media to shape their understanding (Roche et al., 2016). Motivated by ratings and revenue, news editors and reporters will always focus on the most violent, rare types of crime (Roche et al., 2016). This leads to increased support for the death penalty, support of three-strike legislation, and endorsement for dispositional factors as the cause of criminal behavior (Goidel et al., 2006; Dixon, 2007). According to Yousman (2013) not only is there a correlation between media images, tough on crime messaging, and the ballooning rate of incarceration, but asserts this media fed fear has led to beliefs that crime is on the rise when in fact it's been on the decline for over a decade. Not only does this creation of fear impact the criminal justice system, but creation of fear-based imagery of the incarcerated creates a bias that all prisoners are violent, which leads to the inability to empathize with the plight of the incarcerated (Holbert et al., 2004).

American's opinions and views on policy are influenced by fictional dramas in part because of the emotional involvement that viewer's experience (Mutz & Nir, 2010). Dependent on the types of show an individual watches, a viewer's opinion of the incarcerated could be positively or negatively impacted. If an individual is more drawn to the emotional aspects of prison dramas, such as *Orange is the New Black* or docu-dramas like *First and Last Days*,

viewers, according to Mutz & Nir (2010), should have more empathetic feelings towards the incarcerated and a strong belief in their ability to re-enter society. Yousman (2013) examined *NYPD Blue* and *Law & Order*, discovering that two-thirds of the 2010-2011 season featured recently paroled individuals committing violent crimes (murder, rape, assault). These types of shows would negatively influence an individual's belief that the incarcerated could successfully re-enter society, reinforcing the narrative that the incarcerated cannot be rehabilitated (Madriz, 1997). Most shows have studied how individuals fear crime, however little research has been done surrounding how television shapes attitudes towards the justice system or criminal sanctions (Roche et al., 2016).

Prison Culture and the Media

Depictions of violent prisoners are prevalent in all forms of media. If media provides viewers an understanding of the prison system, and imagery that is most prominent and easily accessible has the most impact, then there should be no doubt between the connection to the proliferation of stereotypes and support of punitive punishments (Goidel et al., 2006). Prison shows, which over-represent minorities and present them as violent and cruel, reinforce that prisons are needed as a social necessity (Cecil, 2019, Goidel et al., 2016, Madriz, 1997).

Narrative engageability (Bilandzic, Schnell & Skulla, 2019) is a term used to describe a viewer's intensive experience with a story. It is marked by unwavering attention, disregard for actual surroundings, feelings of experiencing the story and emotions from within it, and has a strong correlation to mean world beliefs. In a time when the term "marathoning" or "bingewatching" are applied to obsessively watching a television series from beginning to conclusion in one session, narrative enagagebility has more prevalence in modern cultivation than any other theory.

In relation to crime and criminals, juxtaposed against those already incarcerated, narrative engageability can play a significant role in the formation of apathetic or empathetic feelings of the incarcerated. Prison dramas seek to entertain; therefore, their story lines tend to stray away from the more serious aspects of actual incarceration such as depression, loneliness, and suicide (Cecil, 2019). Documentaries tend to show more positive outcomes of incarceration. GED programs, prisoners engaging in positive social interactions such as sports leagues, and depicting redemption and transformation demonstrate to viewers that rehabilitation and successful re-entry are possible (Cecil, 2019).

If viewers are exposed to shows such as *Wentworth, Oz*, or *Prison Break* (Jewkes, 2005), the stereotypical aggression and violence on these shows will reinforce mean world beliefs about the incarcerated, producing less empathetic beliefs about those individuals. However, if a viewer is exposed to programming that intends to elicit an empathic response, like shows that promote more humanistic perspectives of the incarcerated—such as *Orange is the New Black, First and Last Day,* or *Girls Incarcerated* (Jones & Gray, 2018; Lois, 2015)—a viewer will cultivate more empathetic feelings towards the incarcerated, especially as it pertains to their ability to be rehabilitated. Mutz and Nir (2010) found that viewing the misfortune of fictional characters not only elicited an emotional response but also held the potential for persuasion toward programmatic messaging. Therefore, cultivation of mean world ideals can be examined through the empathic response of the program viewer.

H1: Empathy toward central character will differ based on whether participants view a positive or negative portrayal of incarceration.

H2: Age is related to empathy toward central character in positive and negative portrayals of incarceration.

Method

Participants

The sample included both males (*n* = 67; 21.8%) and females (*n* = 234; 76.2%) and 2 participants identified as other (.7%). Participants identified predominately as heterosexual (*n* = *256;* 83.4%), with bisexual participants making up 6.8% (*n* = 21), homosexual participants 2.8% (*n* = 2.9%) with 3.9% (*n*=12) preferring not to identify. Participants were predominantly married (*n* =175; 57%), single (*n* = 62; 20.2%), or in a committed relationship, but not married (*n* = 42; 13.7%). Participants identified their race as White or Caucasian (*n* = 242; 78.8%), Black or African American (*n* = 11; 3.6%), Asian or Asian American (*n* = 10; 3.30%), two or more races (*n* = 20; 6.5%), other (*n* = 12; 3.9%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (*n* = 3; 1.0%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (*n* = 2; .7%), and 12 participants did not identify their race. Participants ranged in age from 18-84 (*M* = 41.73; *SD* = 13.47). Participants reported the highest degree achieved was a Bachelors (32.6%), Advanced Degree (MA, MS, PhD, MD, JD etc) (32.3%), some college but no degree (19.9%), Associates (12.7%) and high school graduate (1.3%) with 1.3% choosing not to answer. Most respondents were middle class, the highest percentage of participants reported an income of $75,001-$100,000 (*n* = 58; 18.9%) followed by $50,001-$75,000 (*n* = 47; 15.3%) with 10.4% (*n* = 32) reporting an income of less than $30,000 and 16% (*n* = 49) reporting an income of over $150,000.

Procedure and Instrumentation

After receiving IRB approval (*See Appendix A)* the researcher surveyed participants at a large southwestern university through an online survey about their familiarity with prison related entertainment. This survey was created using Qualtrics survey software (*See Appendix B)*. Participants first read a brief consent form (*See Appendix C).* By clicking "next" participants

agreed to participate in the study. The survey included questions regarding media consumption, exposure to low empathy examples of incarceration in television and film, exposure to high empathy examples of incarceration in television and film and measuring empathy toward a central character.

Media Consumption

Media consumption was measured through a descriptive assessment asking respondents to indicate in minutes how much time they spent watching television weekly.

Exposure to Negative Portrayal of Incarceration

Exposure to negative examples of incarceration was measured through a descriptive assessment asking respondents to indicate if they had seen at least one of the provided negative examples of incarceration they had viewed first on television, and then in film. A follow up descriptive assessment asked them to indicate the exact number of the listed shows they had seen. Negative examples of television and film were informed from similar studies (Cecil, 2019; Jewekes, 2005; Mutz & Nir, 2010). Those shows were: *Cops, Law & Order, NYPD Blue, Chicago P.D., OZ, Prison Break, Wentworth, Lockdown, Hard Time*. The negative examples of incarceration in film were: *American History X, Shot Caller, Felon, The Escapist, The Experiment, The Escape Plan, Fortress, Lookout, American Me, Con Air, Death Race*.

Exposure to Positive Portrayals of Incarceration

Exposure to positive examples of incarceration was measured through a descriptive assessment asking respondents to indicate if they had seen at least one of the provided positive examples of incarceration they had viewed first on television, and then in film. A follow up

descriptive assessment asked them to indicate the exact number of the listed shows they had seen. Positive examples of television and film were informed from similar studies (Jewekes, 2005; Jones & Gray, 2018; Lois, 2015; Mutz & Nir, 2010). Those shows were: *Orange is the New Black, The 100, Release, Time: The Kalief Browder Story, Girls Incarcerated, Hard Time, Lock Up, The Night Of, First and Last, Making a Murder, 60 Days In, For Life.* The positive examples of incarceration in film were: *The Shawshank Redemption, The Green Mile, 13th, Just Mercy, When They See Us, Fruitvale Station, Conviction, After Innocence, Dead Man Walking, The Life of David Gale.*

Empathy Toward Central Character in Plot

Empathy towards a central character in plot was measured using seven items (Mutz & Nir, 2010). Questions were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (i.e., *Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Neutral/ Neither Agree nor Disagree; Agree, Strongly Agree*). *Orange is the New Black* and *Time: The Kalief Browder* Story (*See Appendix D)* were utilized as the positive (high empathy) portrayals of the incarcerated. *Oz* and *Wentworth* were utilized as the negative (low empathy) portrayals of the incarcerated. Questions posed for each video clip included: "I found it difficult to see things from [main character's point of view];" "I do not feel sorry for [main character];" "I do not feel pity for [character];" "I feel like [character] could be rehabilitated." Three of the items were reverse coded. After accounting for the items that were reverse coded, higher scores indicated higher empathy towards the incarcerated and belief in their ability to be rehabilitated.

Analysis Plan

A dependent samples t-test was used to analyze whether empathy towards a central character (DV) differed based on exposure to negative or positive portrayals of the incarcerated (IV). Next, a correlation was used to analyze the relationship between age and empathic concern towards the incarcerated.

Results

H1: t-test

A paired samples t-test was used to test whether empathy toward central character differed based on whether participants viewed a positive or negative portrayal of incarceration. H1 was supported. Results showed that empathy was significantly higher when participants watched a positive portrayal of incarceration ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .26$) than when they watched a negative portrayal of incarceration ($M = 2.92$, $SD = .70$), $t(293) = 8.11$, $p < .01$.

H2: Correlation

A Pearson correlation was used to test the association between age and empathy toward central character in positive and negative portrayals of incarceration. H2 was partially supported. There is a significant negative, albeit weak, relationship between age and empathy toward character in negative portrayals of incarceration ($r = -.18$, $p < .01$). There was no correlation between age and positive portrayals of incarceration.

Discussion

Results of this study indicated that empathy was significantly higher when participants watched a positive portrayal of incarceration than when they watched a negative portrayal (*See Figure 1*). As the results suggest, there is correlation between the type of programming viewers are exposed to in the media, and our empathic response. Similar to Mutz & Nir's (2010) study,

shows with highly emotive content resulted in viewers expressing higher levels of empathy for those characters, and believing in their rehabilitation. Content that portrayed stereotypically violent attitudes of the incarcerated, resulted in a lower empathic response, and a negative belief in the character's rehabilitation.

The correlation between the amounts of programming a viewer is exposed to and their level of empathy, is worth noting. When examining time spent watching and the number of negative portrayals a viewer has seen, results showed that empathy for central characters went down. The decrease in empathy for these characters is expected, as they are representative of the violent, gang-affiliated prisoner narrative fed in the media (Cecil, 2017; Escholz et al., 2003; Madriz, 1997; Mastro & Robinson, 2000). Previous research has discussed the connection between emotionally intense or violent media, and its impact on the cultivation of mean world ideals (Riddle et al., 2011). The low empathy samples presented to surveyors were intentionally violent in nature, utilizing stereotypically aggressive, gang-affiliated minorities that reinforce beliefs about an unsafe world (Holbert et al., 2004).

What is most compelling however, is the negative, albeit weak, correlation to how many low empathy shows a viewer watched, and the lack of empathy for characters in positive portrayals (*See Figure 4*). Researchers specifically examining mean world influences of cultivation theory posit extensive viewing of violent matter will negatively impact views of criminals (Cecil, 2019). This data illustrates that with extensive viewing of negative portrayals, apathy towards criminals carries forward, even when viewing a positive portrayal. This aligns with Gerbner et al.'s (1980) original findings: mean world beliefs are influenced by what is seen on television, and influences world view. Continuous exposure to media that illustrates prisoners as a violent threat to society will resonate and negatively impact those opinions going forward.

Additionally, the study looked at media as a macro level of influence as informed by Potter's (2004) research. Television shows—broadcast on both mainstream television and streaming services, films, as well as questions about local, network, cable news, and news accessed online through apps or social media—were all included. Results of empathic response show, as Potter asserted, that the media plays a larger role in cultivation of mean world ideals than has been previously discussed or examined through impact studies focusing on a specific show or genre.

There was a significant negative, but weak, relationship between age and empathy toward characters in negative portrayals. However, positive portrayals and age showed no correlation (*See Figure 2*). While the association between age and empathy was only partially supported, the way in which the data correlated is worth noting. As age increased, empathy for characters decreased. With the mean age of 41.73 (*SD* = 13.47; *Median* = 40) the empathic response in regard to age aligns with expectations presented in supporting research (Goidel et al., 2006; Holbert et al., 2004). Previous research found older members of society are more likely to have their fear response activated with images of violence (Riddle et al., 2011). Both of the low empathy programs shown to participants contained these types of violent images. Therefore, the relationship between age and empathy suggests that apathetic views of the incarcerated are cultivated in older populations. Though the study did not find significant relationship between high empathy programming and age, researchers have found in previous studies, younger generations—Generation Y and Z, specifically— have higher levels of empathy than generations previous (Moscrip, 2019).

Limitations

There were several limitations that are worth considering. First, this study was executed via the internet to a random sampling of participants. As a result, participants skewed predominately female ($n = 234$; 76.2%), white ($n = 242$; 78.8%) and with a mean age of 41.73 ($SD = 13.47$; *Median* = 40). In future research, a representative sample, or a convenience sample might generate more balance between sex, race, and age.

The length of the television clips may have also been a limitation. With each clip running approximately 2 minutes and 30 seconds, there may not have been enough emotional subtext within these clips to elicit a fully empathic response, especially for participants unfamiliar with the shows. An examination of those already familiar with these programs, might generate interesting data in regard to how their opinions of the incarcerated have been cultivated. In the future, pre-screening participants to gauge the level of frequency they engage with high and low empathy prison shows may also be beneficial.

In future studies, prescreening respondents using Davis' Interpersonal Reactivity Index, similar to Mutz & Nir's (2010) study could prove beneficial. Having the ability to provide control groups of those who self-test for high empathy and low empathy could result in a deeper understanding how empathic response factors into opinions of the incarcerated. Additionally, a pre-screen survey informed by Davis' Interpersonal Reactivity Index, but tailored specifically to questions about the incarcerated, would similarly provide valuable insight for data correlation.

Finally, conducting this survey might have even more success if done in person. The researcher reports receiving feedback from participants at the conclusion of the survey that they had been hesitant to click on the survey link. Despite the recruitment script stating the intention of the survey, many feared the link to be illegitimate. With identify theft, phishing, and hacking

dangers, society has become more leery of clicking web links that they can't personally verify as a legitimate source.

Practical Implications

Results from this study suggest a few avenues for practical implication. First, this quantitative study examined empathy as a signifier of cultivation of mean world beliefs, specifically as they pertain to the incarcerated. Results showed that media has a much more significant role in cultivation than has previously been studied. Media as a macro level influencer should become normative. As a result, previous cultivation studies, examining media at the micro level, could use empathy as a signifier, expand to a macro level examination of media, and inform through qualitative research. It would be valuable to examine empathy as a signifier and its influence on cultivation as it pertains to body image (Mastro & Figueroa-Caballero, 2018) or social comparison and affluenza (Harmon, 2019; Yang & Oliver, 2010). Would the introduction of empathy as a dependent variable similarly affect how society cultivates views of the poor or the overweight?

Changing society's views of the incarcerated is not a problem with an immediate solution. While results from this study show empathy correlates with emotive content, there are many societal influences surrounding the incarcerated that would also need to be examined. However, this research can potentially inform correctional studies or re-entry programs. Having data showing that empathy and apathy are cultivated through television, film, and news has potential to assist caseworkers and those who work with the justice involved, in preparing the incarcerated for reentry. Data collected showed correlation between high empathy and belief in rehabilitation, and that information can better prepare the justice impacted for job interview preparation and addressing concerns surrounding their records. Framing their personal narrative

within the context of "prison isn't like they show it on television," or "not everyone who goes to prison is a violent offender," could potentially engage an empathic response.

Future Directions

Future iterations of this study should consider examining the differences in cultivation of mean world beliefs—as they pertain to the incarcerated—relating to age and sex. Fear of victimization are highest among women and those falling into the "baby boomer" category and older (Goidel et al., 2006; Holbert et al., 2004; Riddle et al. 2011). Therefore, examining these subsets would be beneficial in future studies. Prior research has also discussed that Generation Y and Generation Z access media in vastly different ways than the generations prior them, which holds potential for informing the level of cultivation they experience (Moscrip, 2019). While the findings in this study did not fully support this hypothesis, further research surrounding empathy by generation in a controlled versus random sampling could be done. Previous scholarship has suggested that as a result of catastrophic societal events which shaped Gen Z's growing years, such as 9/11 and terrorism, school shootings, the fight for LGBTQ rights, and social movements such as Black Lives Matter, their ability to empathize is significantly higher than prior generations (Moscrip, 2019).

The cultivation of mean world ideals should continue to be examined at a macro level as Potter (2014) urges Communication scholars to do. In this millennium, how society accesses entertainment and news is markedly different from what Gerbner et al. (1980) were familiar with, and Cultivation Theory should change with the times. While this study focused specifically on the cultivation of mean world ideals pertaining to criminals at a macro level, repeating Gerbner et al.'s original study would be a fascinating exploration into how cultivation has changed or stayed the same in a forty year span.

This study drew from research in the fields of Human Communication, Mass Communication and Media, Criminal Justice and Justice Studies, as well as Social Work. Each research field could potentially utilize this study as a springboard for broader examination. This intersectionality is what makes potential future directions so exciting. Dixon et al. (2007) discussed how the reporting of crime cultivates mean world belief, future research could examine the impact of cultivation on criminals actively standing trial. As part of the examination, how our presumed ideals of criminals impact jury prejudice, trial outcomes, or sentencing. Mass Communication scholars could examine the impact of highlighting more positive stories surrounding rehabilitated criminals, and whether repeated exposure to positive stories lessened mean world beliefs. Finally, Social Workers could examine how sensationalized crime reporting affects families of the incarcerated in regard to stigma and shame.

Having evidence that low empathy shows predict apathetic views of the incarcerated, could be foundational in how we address and attempt to reduce stigma. Future scholarship could be done surrounding reduction of stigma/shame through the introduction of high empathy media. Considering we are on the precipice of massive social change at the moment, cultivation of mean world ideals as a result of incognizant racism and stereotypical bias (Dixon, 2007; Dixon, 2008), should also be examined. Especially as they pertain to news reporting and media coverage. Mutz & Nir (2010) had urged scholars to further examine cultivation and its effect on political attitudes and how empathic response may be influencing how people vote. However scholars can utilize the correlations in this study to examine the impact of the media at a macro level, in many other directions as well.

Finally, it would be worthwhile to further examine how society has constructed these stereotyped images of the incarcerated. This focus has the potential for transdisciplinary

research, as films such as *13th* (DuVernay, 2016) are rife with implications for future directions. Communication studies that specifically focus on incarceration and the impact of Colonial Theory, and Jim Crow, as well as examinations pertaining to the use of racialized words like "thug" (DuVernay, 2016) have all contributed to the construction of a stereotyped prisoner not based in fact, but cultivated by fear.

Conclusion

Cultivation of mean world ideals was shown to influence empathetic and apathetic views of the incarcerated. Mean world beliefs as they pertain to the incarcerated, have the potential to impact a prisoner's ability to successfully re-enter society and avoid recidivism, as a result of these cultivated ideals. Previous research applied cultivation theory at a micro level, examining crime and criminals within specific shows or genres to show a cultivated mean world belief. As the media is a direct reflection of society—either fictitious in the case of television and film, or the chosen reality of the news narrative—media is unique in the amount of influence it has over how society shapes these opinions. Examining media at the macro level, specifically testing for empathy and apathy, is a first step forward in studying the significance of media on how ideals are cultivated. This study shows potential that empathy can play a pivotal role in the reduction of stigma, specifically as it pertains to those who are incarcerated.

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Figures

Paired Samples Test

			Paired Differences						Sig. (2-tailed)
						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	
Pair 1	High_Empathy - Low_Empathy	.33722	.71265	.04156	.25542	.41902	8.114	293	.000

Figure 1: A paired samples t-test was used to test whether empathy toward central character differed based on whether participants viewed a positive or negative portrayal of incarceration. H1 was supported. Results showed that empathy was significantly higher when participants watched a positive portrayal of incarceration (M = 3.26, SD = .26) than when they watched a negative portrayal of incarceration (M = 2.92, SD = .70), t(293) = 8.11, p < .01.

Correlations

		In years, how old are you?	High_Empathy	Low_Empathy
In years, how old are you?	Pearson Correlation	1	-.041	-.178**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.486	.002
	N	298	292	294
High_Empathy	Pearson Correlation	-.041	1	.123*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.486		.035
	N	292	301	294
Low_Empathy	Pearson Correlation	-.178**	.123*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.035	
	N	294	294	300

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Figure 2: A Pearson correlation was used to test the association between age and empathy toward central character in positive and negative portrayals of incarceration. H2 was partially supported. There is a significant negative, albeit weak, relationship between age and empathy toward character in negative portrayals of incarceration(r = -.18, p < .01). There was no correlation between age and positive portrayals of incarceration.

Was the last local news story (TV, Radio, Online, Print, Social Media) you saw/read about a crime/criminal positive or negative?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Positive (story about their release, rehabilitation, reunification with their family, etc)	10	3.3	3.3	3.3
	Negative (discussion of crime committed, breaking parole, naming other offenses, etc)	200	65.1	65.8	69.1
	Neutral	26	8.5	8.6	77.6
	I Don't Remember	49	16.0	16.1	93.8
	I don't watch or read about local news	19	6.2	6.3	100.0
	Total	304	99.0	100.0	
Missing	System	3	1.0		
Total		307	100.0		

Figure 3a: When respondents were asked to recall the last news story they had seen, 65.1% (*n*=200) remembered the story to be negative

What was the race of the subject of this news story?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Caucasian	57	18.6	20.0	20.0
	African American	95	30.9	33.3	53.3
	Latino/a	20	6.5	7.0	60.4
	Asian	2	.7	.7	61.1
	Mixed Race/ Ambiguous	18	5.9	6.3	67.4
	Don't Remember	93	30.3	32.6	100.0
	Total	285	92.8	100.0	
Missing	System	22	7.2		
Total		307	100.0		

Figure 3b: When respondents were asked to recall the race of the perpetrator in the aforementioned news story 30.9% (*n*=95) believed them to be African American

		How many shows listed previously have you seen (please input the number of shows) **(Low Empathy Shows)**	How many of the shows listed previously have you seen? (please input number of shows) **(High Empathy Shows)**	How many movies listed previously have you seen? (please indicate the number of movies below) (High Empathy Movies)	How many movies listed previously have you seen? (please indicate the number of movies below) **(Low Empathy Movies)**
High_Empathy	Pearson Correlation	.137*	.032	-.003	-.093
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.038	.642	.961	.182
	N	231	207	259	209
Low_Empathy	Pearson Correlation	-.108	.036	.081	-.170*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.104	.607	.197	.014
	N	228	205	257	208

Figure 4: There is a significant negative, albeit weak correlation between how many low empathy shows watched and empathy toward central character for positive portrayals of incarceration

Appendix A: IRB APPROVAL

Notification of Approval

To: Melinda Borucki

Link: STUDY00012174

P.I.:   Lori Bednarchik

Title: Correlates of Empathy for Characters in Plot and Opinions of the Incarcerated

Description: This submission has been approved. You can access the correspondence letter using the following link:

Correspondence_for_STUDY00012174.pdf(0.01)

To review additional details, click the link above to access the project workspace.

Appendix B: SURVEY

Survey

1. On average how many minutes do you spend watching TV each week? _____

2. Have you watched an episode of at least one of the following shows (please check yes or no)
   Cops
   Law & Order
   NYPD Blue
   Chicago P.D.
   OZ
   Prison Break
   Wentworth
   Lockdown
   Hard Time
2a. How many shows listed above have you seen?

3. Have you watched an episode of at least one of the following shows (please check yes or no)
   Orange is the New Black
   The 100
   Released
   Time:The Kaliff Browder Story
   Girls Incarcerated
   Hard Time
   Lock Up
   The Night Of
   First and Last
   Making a Murderer
   60 Days In
   For Life
3a. How many shows listed above have you seen?

4. Have you seen any of the following movies?
The Shawshank Redemption
The Green Mile
13th
Just Mercy
When They See Us
Fruitvale Station
Conviction
After Innocence
Dead Man Walking
The Life of David Gale

4a. How many movies listed above have you seen?

5. Have you seen any of the following movies?

American History X
Shot Caller
Felon
The Escapist
The Experiment
The Escape Plan
Fortress
Lookout
American Me
Con Air
Death Race

5a. How many movies listed above have you seen?

The following clip is from TV show *Orange is the New Black.* Please be aware that the clip does utilize language that could be deemed offensive to some viewers.

Video URL: https://youtu.be/nzHZkyC_JdQ

1. After watching the video clip please answer these questions
   I found it difficult to see things from Daya's (pregnant prisoner) point of view
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
2. I could feel Daya's struggle over what to do with her child
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
3. I do not feel sorry for Daya
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
4. I can sense the frustration of Daya's boyfriend and mother
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
5. I can understand why Daya's boyfriend and mother would want her to choose an adoption plan for her unborn baby
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
6. I do not feel pity for any characters in this clip
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
7. I feel like Daya could be rehabilitated
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree

The following clip is the trailer from *TIME: The Kalief Browder Story*. It contains some images

of violence (prison fighting) that could potentially be upsetting to sensitive viewers.

Video URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ri73Dkttxj8

1. I find it difficult to see things from Kalief's point of view
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
2. I can feel Kalief's struggle with his incarceration
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
3. I do not feel sorry for Kalief
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
4. I can sense the frustration from Kalief's mother over his incarceration
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
5. I can understand why Kalief wants to hold Riker's responsible for his incarceration
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
6. I do not feel pity for Kalief's mother
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
7. I do not feel pity for any person profiled in this clip
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
8. I feel like Kalief could be rehabilitated
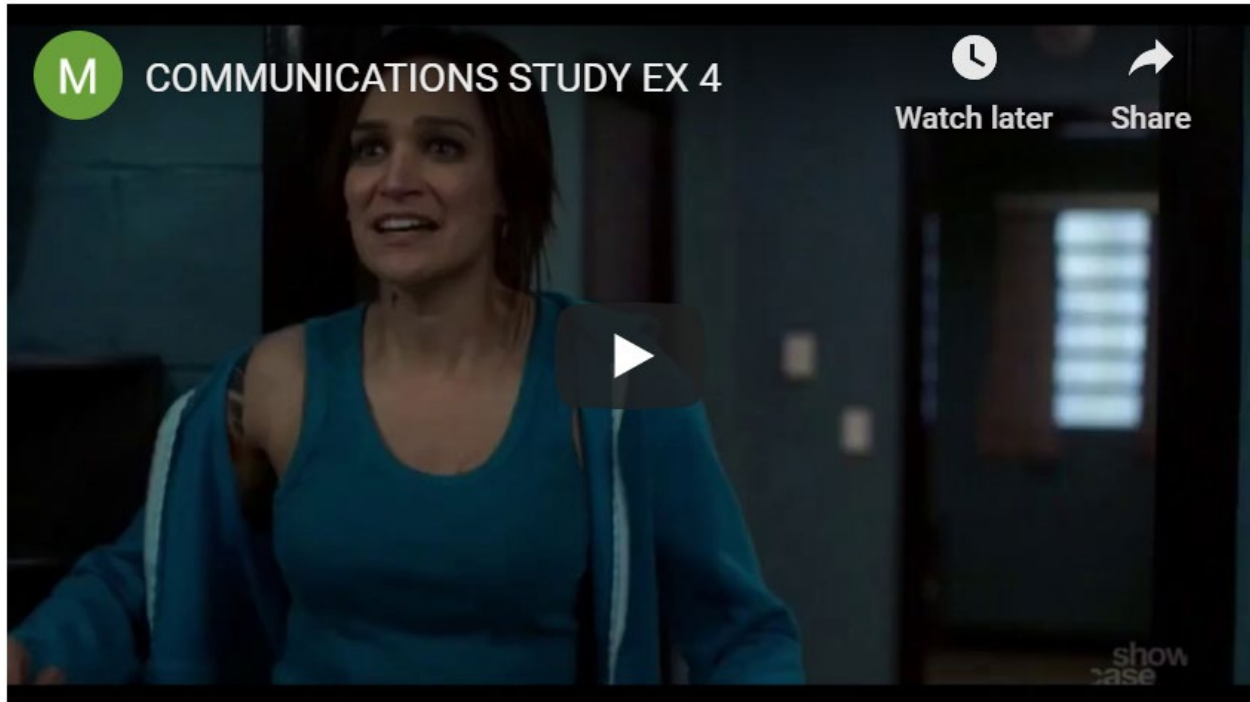   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree

The following clip is the TV show *OZ*. It contains some images of violence (prison fighting)

and language that could be deemed offensive or be potentially upsetting to some viewers

Video URL: https://youtu.be/szbqv-Oupo8

1. I find it difficult to understand Jia's motivation for taunting O'Reilly
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
2. I understand O'Reilly's frustration at Jia's discussion of his brother's death sentence
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
3. I find it difficult to understand O'Reilly's motivation to act violently.
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
4. I feel O'Reilly was right in his aggression towards Jia.
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
5. The prison guards were right to physically reprimand Jia.
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
6. I felt sympathy for Jia's solitary confinement punishment
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
7. I do not feel pity for any of the characters in this clip
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
8. I feel O'Reilly can be rehabilitated
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
9. I feel Jia can be rehabilitated
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree

The following clip is the TV show *Wentworth*. It contains images of violence (prisoners fighting) and offensive language, that could potentially be upsetting to sensitive viewers.

Video URL: https://youtu.be/-7Lk7UoVgjw

1. I find it difficult to understand Iman's (woman in patterned jacket) motivation for wanting to kill Franky (woman with pony tail)
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
2. I feel Joan (aggressive older woman with pony tail) was right in her aggression towards Iman
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
3. I fear for Franky's safety going forward
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
4. I feel sympathy for Franky, the woman whose innocence is proven with Iman's confession
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
5. I pity Franky because the woman who can prove her innocence is dead
   Strongly Agree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
6. I do not feel pity for any characters in this clip
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
7. I feel Franky can be rehabilitated
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
8. I feel Joan can be rehabilitated
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree

9. What is your primary news source?
    Local News (state or regional news programming- ie Wake Up Arizona)
    National News (ie Good Morning America, NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt)
    Cable News (ie Morning Joe, The Five, Special Report)
    I don't watch the news

10. In a typical week, which news channels do you watch most frequently
    a. ABC, CBS
    b. NBC, MSNBC, CNN
    c. FOX (local), FOX (cable)
    d. BBC or other international news networks
    e. None of the above

11. Was the last local news story (TV, Radio, Online, Print, Social Media) you saw about a crime/criminal positive or negative?
    Positive (story about their release, rehabilitation, reunification with their family, etc)
    Negative (discussion of crime committed, breaking parole, naming other offenses, etc)
    Neutral
    Don't Remember
    I don't watch or read about local news

12. What was the race of the subject of this news story?
    a. Caucasian
    b. African American
    c. Latino
    d. Asian
    e. Native American
    f. Mixed Race or Ambiguous Race
    g. Do not remember

13. What is your sex?
    Male
    Female
    Other

14. In years, how old are you?

15. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have achieved?
    Less than high school degree
    HS degree or equivalent

Some college but no degree
Associates
Bachelors
Advanced degree (e.g., MA, MS, PhD, MD, JD, etc.)

16. My household income is:
Below $30,000
$30,001- $50,000
$50,001-$75,000
$75,001-$100,000
$100,001-$125,000
$125,001-$150,000
$150,001+

17. What is your relationship status?
   a. Married
   b. In a committed relationship but not married
   c. Divorced
   d. Separated
   e. Widowed
   f. Single

18. How do you describe your race?
   a. White/Caucasian
   b. Black/ African-American
   c. American Indian or Alaskan Native
   d. Asian or Asian-American
   e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   f. Two or more races
   g. Other (Please specify)

19. What is your sexual orientation?
   a. Heterosexual/Straight
   b. Homosexual/ Gay
   c. Bisexual
   d. Unsure/Questioning
   e. Prefer not to say

Appendix C: CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant:

I am a graduate students working under the direction of Professor Lori Bednarchik in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University.

I am conducting a study about the public's familiarity with prison related entertainment (movies and television shows). I am inviting your participation, which will involve answering general demographic data (age, sex, and education) in addition to filling out a survey that asks you identify television shows (on local, cable, and streaming services) and movies that are familiar to you, which portray the prison system. You will also watch four short clips of prison related television, and answer questions about each 2-3 minute clip. It should take you approximately 20-25 minutes to complete the survey.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Your responses are anonymous and cannot be linked directly to you in any way. You can skip any questions you feel uncomfortable answering or stop participating at any time without penalty. **You must be over the age of 18 in order to participate in this study.**

Your responses on the questionnaire will be used to gain a better understanding of the population's exposure to prison related television programming and movies and their portrayals of the prison system. Although there is no benefit to you, possible benefits of your participation are that we can learn more about public opinion pertaining to issues of incarceration and rehabilitation. Some of the television clips do contain sensitive/violent content that could potentially make you uncomfortable. These video clips will come with a warning, and you will be able to bypass the videos completely without penalty if you feel they could be upsetting to you.

Your responses will be anonymous. No one will be able to determine which responses are yours. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be known. The responses you provide will be categorized and combined with other, similar, responses.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact Lori Bednarchik at Lori.Bednarchik@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

Clicking the 'next' button will be considered your consent to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Melinda Borucki
Lori Bednarchik