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Chapter 3

CULTIVATION THEORY

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Valerie J. Callanan and Jared S. Rosenberger

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CULTIVATION THEORY

Gerbner, Fear, Crime, and Cops

*Valerie J. Callanan and
Jared S. Rosenberger*

In the summer of 2014, the town of Ferguson, Missouri exploded. Hundreds of demonstrators poured into the streets to denounce the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teen, who lay in the street for over three hours after being shot dead by the local police. The police department responded with paramilitary force—riot gear, tanks, and tear gas. Night after night, American news focused on the angry black mobs and their destructive protests. Yet few Americans ever learned of the back story—decades of police harassment that focused on the poor blacks that traversed the tiny white enclaves surrounding Ferguson. These tiny towns resulted as whites fled from Saint Louis during the 1950s and 1960s when legal racial segregation was dismantled during the Civil Rights Movement. Each town has its own police department; each supported in part or whole by ticketing African Americans for such violations as jaywalking, moving violations, or vehicle problems, to such a degree that over 90 percent of individuals brought to court in these towns are non-residential blacks (Department of Justice 2015). Yet this story, which would have provided historical context to the demonstrations, was not covered by the mainstream media. Instead, Americans consumed an all too typical portrayal of African Americans as unruly, violent troublemakers.

The starkest example of institutional racial disparity in the United States is found in its criminal justice system. With over 7 million individuals under correctional control, the United States has an incarceration rate that far surpasses any other country in the world. The “tough on crime” policies of the 1980s and 1990s, such as the “War on Drugs,” generated a massive build-up of the criminal justice system that disproportionately hurts the poor and people of color. For example, blacks are three times more likely to be arrested than whites; once arrested they are much more likely to be convicted, and once convicted they are more likely to receive a harsher sentence (Reiman 2013). The result: an incarceration rate for African-American males six times higher than whites with the lifetime odds of going to prison 1:3 and 1:17, respectively. The *Washington Post* (Kindy et al. 2016) reported that 40 percent of all the police shootings of unarmed individuals in 2015 were black men, although they only comprise 8 percent of the population. These racial differences are too widespread and too common to simply be explained away by individual-level prejudices.

Researchers have suggested that during times of racial threat, white backlash has surfaced, but in the form of social, not overt racial control. Beginning with Nixon's triumph over Southern white Democrats upset with the changes brought about by the Civil Rights Movement, to the recent Tea Party Movement upset with President Obama's win, racial politics have been tied to the politics of crime (for example, see Beckett 1997; Mendelberg 1997; Pickett, Tope, and Bellandi 2014). Thus, criminal justice policies and sentences that outwardly appear non-discriminatory have been disproportionately used over the last several decades against the poor and racial minorities. No better example is the long-running "War on Drugs," which escalated in the 1980s when crack cocaine hit the streets. The federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 established lengthy mandatory sentencing for many drugs, such as five years for one gram of crack cocaine (which is disproportionately used by African Americans).

Crime coverage both changed and exploded during the 1970s and 1980s, which roughly corresponded to the rise in incarceration rates, especially for African-American males. Symbolic racism (the association of societal problems with specific race/ethnic groups) is fed by crime-related media, which has been documented to be very biased in its presentation of crime. For example, news media (Chermak 1995), newspaper accounts of homicide (Buckler and Travis 2005), and crime-reality shows (Oliver 1994) not only focus disproportionately on violent crimes and violent offenders, but more often on black offenders, especially when they commit violent crimes against whites. Thus, many white Americans, fed a steady diet of violent media, were only too content to support the various "wars" against social ills.

As a whole there is sufficient evidence to argue that some of the institutional racism in our criminal justice system may be attributable to how racial minorities are presented in the media. Research beginning in the 1970s recognized that messages about race are not only present in the media, but have an effect on individuals who consume them. In a sense, the media creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where depictions of minorities as criminals are widely presented and result in law enforcement agents, judges, lawyers, and the general public accepting the idea that minorities are more prone to crime. Television news, reality-programming, and primetime dramas tend to favor stereotypical, usually negative, views of racial minorities (Dixon, Azocar, and Casas 2003). This results in a public that subscribes to the cultural ideal of colorblindness while embracing the stereotypes they have been exposed to through media representations. This chapter summarizes the research on media cultivation of perceptions about race and crime in three areas: fear of crime, punitive attitudes, and attitudes toward law enforcement. We begin with a brief overview of cultivation theory.

Gerbner and Cultivation Theory

In the 1970s George Gerbner and his associates began to study the effects of heavy, long-term television exposure. This project was not the first attempt to identify the effects of television, as social learning theorists were testing the effects of short-term exposure to violence on television on subsequent individual violent behavior (e.g., Bandura 1963). Gerbner, however, was not particularly concerned with how representations on television influence a person's behaviors, per se, but rather how repetitive patterns in television shape individuals' views of social reality (Shanahan and Morgan 1999).

This "Cultural Indicators Project" used a "three-pronged" research scheme: institutional process analysis, message system analysis, and cultivation analysis (Gerbner 1998).

Institutional process analysis studies how policies are designed to control the flow of media messages. Gerbner recognized that there are some differences in television messages based on the program, channel, or an individual's preference for certain types of television. However, he believes that it "is only repetitive, long-range, and consistent exposure to patterns common to most programming, such as casting, social typing, and the 'fate' of different social types, that can be expected to cultivate stable and widely-shared images of life and society" (Gerbner 1998: 181).

Institutional process analysis argues that many of the problems associated with television consumption are related to the way it is dominated by private corporations. Despite broadcasts being transmitted on public airways, the public has little control over television content. Because of the organizational imperative to turn a profit, television programming in the United States targets the mainstream (middle-class whites) and, thus, is relatively homogenous in content and narrative. Of interest, Gerbner was concerned about private control during a time period in which many more media companies existed. Sweeping deregulation throughout the 1980s and 1990s drastically reduced legal barriers for media corporations to merge. As a result, a small number of firms now control the majority of print, radio, and television media (Bagdikian 2014). In 1983, 90 percent of American media was produced by 50 companies, but only 6 by 2011 (Lutz 2012). This group of conglomerates now produces homogenized programs designed for the global market (Gerbner 1998). So, despite a drastic increase in consumption and production, these mergers have led to far less diversity in the content and messages of media produced.

The second prong of the analytical schema, message system analysis, examines the most common patterns and trends of media messages. Gerbner and his colleagues collected years of television programming data and used content analysis to identify the underlying messages. Their results found that violence was the most common denominator across television programming. They argued that the prevalence of violence in television transmits repeated messages that the world is a scary place where people cannot be trusted (Gerbner and Gross 1976).

Subsequent research has found television violence is disproportionately linked to specific demographic groups. Content analyses of local television news programs find that African Americans are overrepresented as criminals, often violent (Dixon and Linz 2000; Dixon, Azocar, and Casas 2003). Moreover, news stories about crime are more likely to be covered in the media when they involve black offenders and white victims (Dixon and Linz 2000). In addition, the way blacks are presented has been found to be qualitatively different from whites. Specifically, blacks are more likely to be shown in handcuffs or being combative with police (Entman 1990). Crime-based reality programs, such as *COPS*, also skew the presentation of crime. Like television news and crime dramas, blacks and Latinos are overrepresented as criminals, and they are more likely than white suspects to be physically attacked by the police (Oliver 1994; Welch 2007).

In contrast, whites make up the vast majority of television characters, as well as the victims of crime presented in the media (Britto et al. 2007; Chermak 1995; Prichard and Hughes 1997; Weiss and Chermak 1998). Additionally, whites are much more likely to be portrayed in positive roles and the ratio of positive roles to negative ones (such as an offender) is higher for whites than people of color (e.g., Dixon, Azocar, and Casas 2003; Romer, Jamieson and DeCoteau 1998). These racial typifications have led many scholars to claim that such misrepresentation cultivates not only higher levels of fear of crime, but more punitive attitudes toward black offenders and justification for questionable

police practices, such as the use of force and racial profiling (Oliver and Armstrong 1998; Robinson 2000). However, very few studies have actually tested these ideas.

The third prong in Gerbner's research schema is the one most studied. Gerbner and Gross (1976) hypothesized that the inordinate amount of violence in television programming gives viewers an inaccurate and exaggerated perception of how much violence takes place in the real world. They coined this the cultivation hypothesis. Results from the Cultural Indicators Project showed support for the cultivation hypothesis and offered other insights on the effects of television consumption. Specifically, individuals who consume higher amounts of television were more likely to fear crime and believe it is much more prevalent than it is in the real world (Gerbner et al. 1977). Further, Gerbner and Gross (1976) suggested that heavy television consumers are less likely to trust people. They described the belief system that develops among heavy watchers as the "mean-world view."

The Cultural Indicators Project has done much to expand our knowledge on why certain representations are common in the media, what messages are sent by these representations, and how the representations affect individuals. Since this initial work, researchers have begun to consider how the effects of these representations might vary across audiences and, to a smaller degree, across media forms.

Mainstreaming and Resonance

Later research conducted by Gerbner et al. (1980) found support for two important processes related to media cultivation: mainstreaming and resonance. The concept of mainstreaming suggests that television representations work in line with the mainstream values and beliefs of a given culture (Gerbner et al. 1986). Thus, mainstreaming is a process that involves the erosion of sub-cultural or group differences through media consumption. According to Gerbner et al. (1986), stories in the media (whether print, television, radio, internet, or film) serve as a mechanism that unites publics that come from tremendously diverse cultural, racial, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds. Media messages provide all Americans with what Gerbner refers to as "a packet of common consciousness—wherever they go" (Gerbner et al. 1986: 22). This allows diverse groups of individuals to live and work together with "some degree of cooperation" (22). The dominant theme of these messages is the reinforcement of the existing social and economic structure.

Resonance is the idea that individuals may be more likely to accept television representations if they can relate to the depiction (Gerbner et al. 1980). For example, a depiction of a violent assault against a young Caucasian woman may have a greater impact on a viewer who has had a similar experience or belongs to the same demographic group. Thus, Gerbner et al.'s (1980) research suggests that depictions have varying degrees of impact on viewers depending on how they resonate with the consumer.

The cultivation hypothesis and the work of Gerbner and his colleagues have not been accepted by the academic community without challenges. For example, Hughes (1980) critiqued the approach of Gerbner and his colleagues, arguing that the relationship between television consumption and "mainstream" could be explained by some third-party variable. Further, replications of Gerbner's research indicated that the relationship between television consumption and the cultivation of mainstream values was much more complicated than initially presented (Heath and Gilbert 1996). Essentially, as outlined by Hall et al. (1978) and Livingstone (1993), one's position in a given social

structure conditions how media messages are received; moreover, those responses tend to be similar among members that occupy similar socio-demographic strata.

Current tests of the relationship between media consumption and the cultivation of beliefs, while controlling for a range of demographic and experiential factors, do exist. These studies suggest media consumption influences fear of crime (Madriz 1997; Chiricos, Padgett, and Gertz 2000; Romer, Jamieson, and Aday 2003), public opinion of the police (Eschholz et al. 2002; Dowler and Zawilski 2007; Callanan and Rosenberger 2011), and views about criminal sentencing (Roberts and Doob 1990; Dowler 2003; Callanan 2005).

Media Formats

As technology has evolved, so has the number of different types of media outlets that permeate our lives. Some may argue that since news and entertainment have been expanded to various media formats, the messages may be very different. However, the process of mainstreaming suggests that even these alternative media formats are oriented to the widest possible audience. Further, it has been argued that while numerous media formats exist, the same messages are being repackaged to fit a different medium, a process referred to as “looping” (Surette 2001). As Gerbner (1998) suggests, mainstreaming represents “a relative homogenization, an absorption of divergent views, and an apparent convergence of disparate outlooks on the overarching patterns of the television world” (183). Certainly individuals can seek out alternative viewpoints, and representations that diverge from the mainstream, but these are typically singular and short-lived experiences for the consumer. Cultivation analysis suggests that the pervasive and overriding messages sent through the mass media, no matter the format, are the ones that will ultimately influence a consumer’s view of the social world.

One of the most important factors in criminal punishment is race/ethnicity. Study after study has documented the huge racial inequality in the criminal (in)justice system, especially among black males. Blacks have historically held lower punitive attitudes than whites. This difference has traditionally been explained as a consequence of white racial animus and fear of black threat, which elevates punitive attitudes among whites, and distrust of the criminal injustice system among blacks, who have been or know of people who have been unfairly targeted and harmed by the system. Yet little is known about the correlates of black punitiveness outside of studies that contrast these sentiments with whites. With respect to media and cultivation, one would assume that blacks, who on average are more likely to live in high-crime areas than whites, would be more influenced by crime-related media consumption. Yet the little research that has examined race/ethnic differences in the effects of crime-related media consumption has found that very few media forms influence blacks’ fear of crime, their beliefs about crime and/or the criminal justice system, or their punitive attitudes (Callanan 2005). In contrast, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that crime-related media consumption among whites cultivates fear of crime, belief that crime is rising, confidence in the criminal justice system, and higher punitive attitudes.

A few explanations of these differences have been presented in the literature. First, media may not have as strong an influence on minority viewers because its effects are moderated by personal experience. Previous research has suggested that the media is most influential when the viewer has little or no personal experience with the subject matter. Gerbner et al. (1980) called this idea the “substitution thesis” or, simply stated,

the idea that media representations fill the consumer's voids in knowledge (Graber 1980; Surette 2007). This lack of first-hand knowledge may be disproportionately experienced by white viewers, as minorities are more likely to have direct or indirect interactions (through friends and family members) with the criminal justice system. While media representations "substitute" for the lack of real-world experiences of whites, they most likely conflict with the experiences of minority viewers. An additional explanation of the disproportionate effect of media representations on white viewers has become known as the "affinity thesis" (Dowler and Zawilski 2007). The mainstream media tends to produce programs geared toward middle-class whites, their widest and most profitable consumers. Thus, characters (especially victims) in crime-related media tend to reflect the demographic makeup of this audience. The "affinity thesis" posits that when viewers share socio-demographic characteristics with characters portrayed in the media, they are more likely to relate to their stories. In support of this, research has found that when viewers share racial and gender backgrounds with victimized characters on television, they themselves are more likely to fear being victimized (Chiricos et al. 1997).

Cultivation and Fear of Crime

There are a number of areas that test the effects of media consumption on various forms of public opinion. The most substantial body of research is on the cultivation of fear of crime (e.g., Callanan 2012; Callanan and Rosenberger 2015; Chiricos, Eschholz, and Gertz 1997; Doob and MacDonald 1979; Gerbner, Morgan, and Signorelli 1980; Lane and Meeker 2003; Weitzer and Kubrin 2004). Early tests of Gerbner's work established support for the "mean and scary world" hypothesis, which argues that the more television someone consumes, the more likely they are to be fearful and believe no one can be trusted. However, the research was criticized on the measures used to represent "fear" (see LaGrange and Ferraro 1989). Later researchers were careful to test the influence of television consumption on cognitive perceptions of crime victimization and emotive fear of crime separately (see Eschholz et al. 2003; Ferraro 1995, 1996). Studies have found support for the notion that heavy television consumption increases both of these measures. In addition, Callanan and Rosenberger (2015) found that media consumption increases perceived risk, which in turn increases fear of crime. Thus, television has the potential to cultivate the mean and scary worldview both directly and indirectly (also see Box, Hale, and Andrews 1988; Callanan 2012; Taylor and Hale 1986).

Researchers have also expanded the scope of cultivation analysis to more than just television consumption. Many researchers now include measures for multiple media forms, such as newspapers, radio, video games, the Internet, and video streaming services. Moreover, researchers often evaluate the relative impact of different crime-related television genres (e.g., Callanan and Rosenberger 2015; Chiricos et al. 1997; Weitzer and Kubrin 2004), although Gerbner argued the specific genre mattered less than the cumulative hours spent viewing television. The explosion of multiple media forms may give the appearance of more options to viewers. However, the same companies that produce television produce additional forms of media as well (Morgan, Shanahan and Signorelli 2009). Thus, researchers expect messages that cultivate fear of crime and risk of victimization to be present in most types of media. Research finds that in addition to television consumption in general, television news (Chiricos et al. 2000; O'Keefe and Reid-Nash 1987), crime reality-based shows (Callanan 2012; Chiricos et al. 1997), and newspapers (Heath 1984) have all been linked with the cultivation of fear.

However, the effects of media consumption on fear of crime do not appear to be equal across race and ethnicity. In one of the few studies to test for differences in the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime across race, Callanan (2012) found that consumption of local television news and crime-based reality programs increased fear of crime for whites, blacks, and Latinos. However, there was some variability in the effects of crime dramas and newspapers across race/ethnic groups. Callanan and Rosenberger (2015) found that consumption of crime-reality programs increased white women's fear but had no effect on women of color. In addition, they found newspaper consumption makes white women more fearful but has no effect on both Hispanic and African-American women. The results suggest that the impact of media consumption is felt differently across race and ethnicity.

Cultivation and Public Opinion of the Police

Another area of cultivation research that touches on race and media is how viewers may cultivate opinions of legal authorities, especially law enforcement (Callanan and Rosenberger 2011; Dowler 2002; Dowler and Zawilski 2007; Eschholz et al. 2002). As Gerbner's research initially pointed out, television representations are saturated with violence and crime, and where there is violence, there is law enforcement. Issues of crime and criminal justice are consistently one of the most covered topics in the news (McCall 2007). While crime dramas have been around for quite some time, there has been an increase in the number of crime dramas in primetime television. As a specific example, *Law and Order* ran for 20 years and produced four additional spinoffs, including the very popular *Law and Order: SVU*. In 2008, the average viewer could choose from as many as 19 crime dramas on a given night (Rhineberger-Dunn, Rader, and Williams 2008). In addition, there has been an increase in crime reality-based programming over the last 30 years. Building from the initial success of the television series *COPS*, shows like *The Forensic Files*, *The F.B.I Files*, *Cold Case Files*, and *The First 48* rank among the most popular crime-related programs (IMDb 2016). Although these programs are highly edited and dramatized, studies find that most viewers perceive them as a realistic view of crime (Oliver and Armstrong 1998). This perceived realism helps to explain why crime-reality shows (in addition to local television news) are found to have a more powerful effect on viewers' attitudes than other crime genres (e.g., Eschholz et al. 2002).

The "substitution thesis" suggests that television representations fill gaps of knowledge that viewers have. The likelihood that messages related to the police will cultivate viewers' perceptions is driven by the fact that most people have very limited real-world experience with the police or the criminal justice system (Surette 2007). The average American's interactions with law enforcement do not go beyond the inconvenience of an occasional traffic ticket (Surette 2001). Given that research finds that personal experience tends to reduce the impact of media representations (Chiricos, Padgett, and Gertz 2000; Gerbner et al. 1980), there is great potential for media representations of the police to have a significant impact on most consumers.

A number of studies have supported the idea that media consumption cultivates various types of positive attitudes toward the police (Dowler 2002; Eschholz et al. 2002; Callanan and Rosenberger 2011). These include confidence in the police, police effectiveness, police fairness, and perceptions of police misconduct and the excessive use of force. Dowler (2002) found that consumption in general at least slightly increases the perception that the police are effective. A study conducted by Eschholz et al. (2002) found that viewers

who consume higher amounts of television news and crime reality-based programming are more likely to have confidence in the police. Callanan and Rosenberger (2011) tested the relationship between consumption of various types of media (crime dramas, crime reality, newspaper, television news, and total hours consumed) and multiple measures of attitudes toward the police. Their work found that crime-related media consumption increases confidence in the police and the perception that they are fair but has no impact on the belief that they use excessive force. However, these effects were not consistent across race; media consumption increased confidence in the police for white respondents, but had little to no significant effect on Latinos or blacks. They argue that this finding is also explained by the relationship between race/ethnicity and personal experience with the police. While whites may have limited interactions with the police so that media representations substitute for this lack of experience, black respondents are more likely to have been, or know someone who has been, the victim of police discrimination. As an example, statistics from New York City's Stop and Frisk program show that of the 4.4 million stops conducted by the NYPD between 2004 and 2012, 83 percent of those stopped were black or Hispanic (*New York Times* 2013).

Cultivation and Punitive Attitudes

Evidence suggests that viewers cultivate opinions of the criminal justice system through media representations. These opinions have been shown to manifest themselves into higher levels of fear of crime, more support for the police, and misconceptions about the prevalence of crime. In addition, research has connected media consumption with more punitive attitudes toward offenders (Callanan 2005; Demker et al. 2008; Roberts and Doob 1990). Theoretically these works suggest that the way crime is presented in the media evokes harsh blame and condemnation of the individual. Crime is often framed in a way that suggests crime is a massive public issue that threatens all people (Sacco 1995). The criminal justice system, which is rife with procedure, is often portrayed as an impediment to "real" justice and puts the public at risk. This is commonly called the "faulty criminal justice frame" (Surette 2007). This frame lends itself to a simple solution; we need harsher laws and more punitive sentencing to protect the public from the real threat that criminals pose to us all (Rosenberger and Callanan 2011).

On one hand, the research suggests that media consumption cultivates positive attitudes toward the police and support for a more punitive justice system. On the other hand, research suggests that minorities disproportionately make up the criminal element that the public should fear in media representations (Dixon and Linz 2000). It seems then that media representations of the criminal justice system suggest that crime primarily committed by minorities, and despite the best efforts of the police, is a threat that demands action in the form of punitive laws and sentencing. Despite the connections of these separate lines of inquiry, and the fact that researchers have identified racial prejudice as an important predictor of punitiveness (Johnson 2001; Young 1985), very few researchers have attempted to determine how the media's effect on punitiveness differs across racial groups.

Given what has been established in research on media and public opinion of the criminal justice system, it is logical to posit that punitiveness is disproportionately cultivated in white viewers. Racial typifications have a heavy presence in crime-related media (Entman 1990, 1992); Chiricos, Welch, and Gertz (2004) and individuals who believe these racial typifications are more likely to be punitive. Callanan (2005) found

that crime-related media had no direct effect on support for “three-strikes” sentencing (in which life-long terms are imposed on repeat offenders), irrespective of race/ethnicity; however, there were significant race/ethnicity differences in the effects of media consumption on other attitudes and beliefs about crime that were linked to greater support for three-strikes. Her research suggests that punitiveness among whites is tied to the messages they receive about racial minorities in crime-related media. The fear and concern over crime is driven both by their misconceptions of its prevalence and the skewed racial presentation of offenders and victims. The result is white viewers who are more likely to prefer punitive sentencing laws as a means to protect themselves and the public.

Conclusion

To sum, it appears that cultivation effects vary across race/ethnicity depending on the belief, attitude, or perception that is being explored. The existing empirical evidence, although scant, suggests significant support for Gerbner’s cultivation theory. Local television news and crime-based reality programs, which are perceived as realistic portrayals of crime, appear to have similar effects on fear of crime irrespective of race/ethnicity. As Gerbner argued decades ago, consumption of mainstream media does cultivate a “mean-world” view and fear in consumers, no matter what their personal characteristics.

Cultivation effects on attitudes toward the police, however, are only found among whites. This supports Gerbner’s later work on substitution effects. When crime coverage is focused on lethal violence perpetrated by inner-city gang members and drug users who happen to be black or Hispanic, it is not surprising that white viewers would support police responses, no matter how egregious. When we portray crime in simple moral and racialized terms—dark evil-doer versus the white heroic crime fighter—it invokes simple responses to a complex issue. What these three lines of research show us is that media cultivates fear of crime and support for the police and perpetuates whites’ perceptions of “the criminal justice system as an institution that should protect their interests by keeping minorities ‘in their place’” (Unnever, Gabbidon, and Higgins 2011: 39). But African Americans, who live with constant reminders of police brutality, know better.

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Further Reading

- Callanan, V. J. (2005) *Feeding the Fear of Crime: Crime-related Media and Support for Three Strikes*. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC. (Explores the link between crime-related media consumption and support for punitive criminal sentencing, providing a robust test of Gerbner's cultivation hypothesis.)
- Entman, R. M. and Rojecki, A. (2000) *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Explores the way in which media representations serve as the primary source of information about African Americans for many white viewers; provides insight into the effect that these images have on the attitudes of whites toward blacks.)
- Shanahan, J. and Morgan, M. (1999) *Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (Gerbner's longtime co-authors explore the way in which television consumption impacts viewers' beliefs and how these beliefs differ on issues of sex, politics, and violence.)
- Surette, R. (2015) *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice: Images, Realities, and Policies*. 5th ed. Stamford, CT: Cengage. (Explores the way in which crime-related media representations shape consumers' reality; highlights the relationship between media consumption, opinions, and policy creation.)