

‘I want to be like the Police on *CSI*’: Does Crime-related Television Impact Perceptions of Police and Investigative Procedures?

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of crime-related television viewing on a number of criminal justice issues including attitudes/perceptions of police, perceptions of forensic evidence, perceptions of clearance rates, and perceptions of crime. Using cultivation theory as a guide, the study tried to ascertain the impact of crime-related television and criminal justice courses on the aforementioned criminal justice issues. In brief, the study found that crime-related television viewing was statistically significant in influencing perceptions of police and the prevalence of forensic evidence. Moreover, non-crime related television watching was statistically significant in influencing perceptions of clearance rates. No television watching variables were determined to be statistically significant in affecting perceptions of crime rates.

Keywords: cultivation theory, perceptions of police, forensic evidence, crime rates, clearance rates, crime dramas

1. Introduction

Mass media plays a large role in contemporary society. Presidential elections are called immediately, breaking news stories are continuous, and information is often available as soon as it happens. Furthermore, mass media, namely television, shapes our consciousness. As Berger (2007) claimed, “The media entertain us, socialize us, inform us, educate us, sell things to us (and sell us, as audiences, to advertisers), and indoctrinate us – among other things” (p. 17). As the evolution from print to radio to television commenced, crime dramas remained popular in American culture.

Today, crime stories represent a larger portion of both local and national newscasts, television dramas, and documentaries. Moreover, the form of crime-related programming has changed. Where once detective stories dominated, now forensic science dramas and documentaries dominate. Earlier shows asked “who did it?”, while newer shows not only ask “who?” but “how did they do it?”. In any event, these types of crime-related programs have ushered in a new cultural phenomenon that impacts the criminal justice system and criminal justice education (Fradella, Owen, & Burke, 2007; Thomas, 2006). Fradella et al (2007) succinctly described this impact when they stated:

The profound impact of the CSI effect on the justice system necessarily impacts criminal justice education as well. This is evident when prospective criminal justice students ask, ‘What do I have to do to be like the people on CSI?’ (one author’s answer is ‘major in theater – those people don’t exist in the real world!’). (p. 262)

Anecdotally speaking, potential students are attracted to the criminal justice system through a variety of reasons including, but not limited to, popular culture’s portrayal of its agents and job duties. However, the fast-paced sitcoms that mix job duties may have a detrimental effect on audiences’ perceptions of the criminal justice system as well as other effects such as fear of victimization and inaccurate beliefs about the prevalence of crime and evidence. Some of these effects have been labeled as “mean world syndrome” and “CSI effect.”

There are mixed results pertaining to a CSI effect on juror decisions. However, very few studies focused on the impact crime-related programming may have on students' perceptions pertaining to the roles and responsibilities of criminal justice agents and investigative procedures. Gerbner (1998) suggested that cultivation effects occur over long-term exposure to television in general and that cultivation effects are "aggregate messages embedded in television as a system rather than in specific programs, types, or genres" (p. 181). A few studies have looked specifically at genre-specific effects of crime dramas and other television programming (see Bilandzic & Rossler, 2004; Grabe & Drew, 2007). Grabe and Drew (2007) determined that non-fiction crime shows produce cultivation outcomes, while fictional crime dramas produce little effects. Additionally, the impact of television has been correlated to influence participants' opinions about a great number of topics.

It is essential to analyze the impact of crime dramas on television and/or education on students' perceptions of the criminal justice system. For example, one forensic scientist claimed that 40% of the forensic technology on television does not exist in reality (Houck, 2006; see also Johnson, 2003). Furthermore, Stephens (2007) revealed that only 5% of crime scenes contain blood in reality. However, Podlas (2006) reviewed the first two seasons of *CSI* and found that blood was found at a crime scene over 26% of the time (12 of 46). Accuracy of particular procedures was compared to those listed in the literature review. In addition to accuracy of forensic evidence, it also is critical to explore the perceptions of laboratories and their workers.

Furthermore, Peterson et al. (2009) conducted a field poll of California residents as to their views of reliability and significance of forensic evidence. They found that citizens perceived forensically gathered evidence as more reliable than other forms of evidence, including testimonial evidence. Additionally, they found that those citizens who watch more hours of television find forensic evidence more reliable than those who watch less. Finally, they deemed that citizens who watched crime-related dramas and other justice themed programming were more than twice as likely to convict as those who did not.

1.1 Cultivation Theory

One media theory relevant to this type of influence is cultivation theory. Television was viewed as having a gradual, cumulative influence over time. Through a pattern of repetitive misrepresentations of reality, viewers adopt certain beliefs and attitudes towards reality. The theory postulates that those who watch more television are more likely to develop certain beliefs about social reality based on the consistent depictions shown on television, regardless of the channel or genre selection (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Foy, & Signorielli, 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). The theory separates viewers as either "heavy", "medium", or "light" viewers. Overall, heavy viewers have been shown to have altered views and beliefs of reality that resemble the television world more accurately than the real world (Dieffenbach & West, 2001; Gerbner, 1998). However, since the inception of this theory, more and more diverse programming has been available to consumers. Thus, there have been other studies that have examined the impact of genre specific cultivation effects.

The central proposition of cultivation theory is that the medium of television "cultivates" viewers (especially heavy viewers) into adopting distorted beliefs about social reality that are closer to television reality (Gerber & Gross, 1976). "Television is different from other media also in its centralized mass-production of a coherent set of images and messages produced for total populations, and in its relatively non-selective, almost ritualistic, use by most viewers" (Gerbner, 1998, p. 178). Hence, those viewers who watch the most television, regardless of channel or programming, will develop a set of beliefs about reality that were learned by watching mass quantities of television programs.

Hawkins and Pingree (1981) were among the first to argue that not all television programming content uniformly cultivates worldviews equally. That is, researchers need to focus upon specific genres and compare their cultivation effects rather than treat all television programming as the same. Furthermore, they argued that different genres differ in content messages and structures. For instance, crime dramas have different messages than soap operas, game shows, or comedic programming.

Previous research has indicated stronger cultivation effects from nonfiction genres compared to fiction genres regarding perceptions of crime, fear of crime, and protective behavior (see Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2004, O'Keefe, 1984; O'Keefe & Reid-Nash, 1987). In fact, Holbert Shah, and Kwak (2004) suggested that police reality shows have the strongest predictor for fear and protective behaviors.

If modern television programs are influencing students' perceptions about their potential jobs or colleagues, it is crucial to understand how and to what degree. Gerber (1998) believed that the continuous and repetitive images on television "cultivate" a particular perception about the real world. Heavy watchers seem to undergo significant cultivation effects, while light watchers seem to exhibit little. Therefore, he concluded that heavy watchers of television, in general, answer many questions pertaining to the real-world based on their experiences with television.

Very few studies focused on the impact crime-related programming may have on students' perceptions pertaining to the roles and responsibilities of criminal justice agents and investigative procedures. A few studies have looked specifically at genre-specific effects of crime dramas and other television programming (see Grabe & Drew, 2007; Bilandzic & Rossler, 2004). Grabe and Drew (2007) determined that non-fiction crime shows produce cultivation outcomes, while fictional crime dramas produce little effects. Additionally, the impact of television has been correlated to influence participants' opinions about a great number of topics. It is essential to analyze the impact of crime dramas on television and/or education on students' perceptions of the criminal justice system. Therefore, this study extends previous literature by incorporating media studies and focusing on the potential impact of crime-related television programs on students' perceptions of police, forensic evidence, clearance rates, and crime rates.

2. Methods

This study sought to understand the impact of the extent of viewing crime dramas and other crime-related programming on students' perceptions about the criminal justice system, by using previously researched variables that have been correlated with cultivation effects (e.g., hours spent watching television, perceived realism, message content, personal experience) and demographic variables that have been correlated with cultivation (e.g., age, education, gender, race, income, location of residence, and living situation). The students' major also was also collected.

2.1 Research Questions

The following hypotheses have been made for this research study. The first hypothesis addressed the amount of television respondents watch regularly, and their perceptions about various issues related to the criminal justice system. Previous cultivation studies have separated samples based on the average amount of television a respondent watches (Gerbner, 1998). It was assumed that those who watch more crime-related television would respond with inaccurate perceptions about various issues related to the criminal justice system. Therefore, the general research question pondered if there were statistically significant differences among respondents who watch (measured in hours) crime-related programming on television concerning perceptions about various issues related to the criminal justice system.

Although this study explored student attitudes/perceptions of police officers, their roles, and their responsibilities, previous cultivation studies have suggested that heavy television watching distorts opinions about police (see Morgan & Shanahan, 1997; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999; Weimann, 2000). Since many fictitious crime-related programs present their characters as having multiple responsibilities, including but not limited to interrogating suspects, analyzing evidence, making arrests, and securing crime scenes, there is a potential that audiences may believe that every police officer has these skills. Therefore, the following hypothesis was explored:

2.1.1 RQ1. Respondents' perceptions about police officer duties and responsibilities will significantly differ based on the amount of time spent viewing crime-related television programs.

This study also explored the impact of crime-related television programming on students' perceptions pertaining to forensic evidence accuracy, prevalence, and procedures. There are a number of depictions on crime-related programs that may influence audience perceptions about the accuracy of scientific evidence, equipment used, and forensic technicians. Therefore, the following hypothesis was tested:

2.1.2 RQ2. Respondents' perceptions about the prevalence of forensic evidence will significantly differ based on the amount of time spent viewing crime-related television programs.

It seems that on every episode of *CSI*, *Law and Order*, *Criminal Mind*, and other crime-related programming, the police always find the incriminating evidence or apply perfect logic to apprehend and arrest their suspect(s). In reality, this is far from the truth. For example, criminal homicide has the highest clearance rate for any crime.

In 1976, the clearance rate for homicide was 79% and has continuously declined through 2005 when the clearance rate was 62% (FBI Supplementary Homicide Report, 1976-2005). Even with the advancement in technology and investigative procedures, the number of homicides cleared has been steadily declining over the past 30 years. Although this study examines the impact of television on perceptions of cleared crimes in more detail, Goidel, Freeman, and Procopio (2006) found statistically significant differences among heavy television watchers and their perceptions of crime rates. Those who watched more television felt that the crime rate was increasing. Giacomassi and Vandiver (1999) also found that 82% of introductory students and 56% of seniors overestimated the number of homicides by 25%. Overall, serious violent crime levels have been decreasing since 1993 and property crime levels have continued to decrease since 1973 (FBI, n.d.). Therefore, the following hypotheses were tested:

2.1.3 RQ3. Respondents' perceptions about clearance rates (of crimes reported) will differ based on the amount of time spent viewing crime-related television programs.

2.1.4 RQ4. Respondents' perceptions about reported crime rates will differ based on the amount of time spent viewing crime-related television programs.

This study also explored the impact of education on perceptions of the aforementioned hypotheses by comparing criminal justice and non-criminal justice students by determining if there were statistically significant differences between criminal justice students and non-criminal justice students concerning perceptions about the criminal justice system.

Dantzker and Waters (1999) found that criminal justice students exhibited more positive attitudes towards police in both pre- and post-perception compared to non-criminal justice students when testing their perceptions of police. They concluded that criminal justice courses had a positive effect on perceptions while non-criminal justice courses might cause a negative perception. Although Dantzker and Waters study looked only at the role of criminal justice courses, it seems evident that criminal justice courses impacted the students' perceptions towards police. There were no known studies that looked at other aspects of the criminal justice system, forensic evidence, or other aspects of this study.

Overall, there are some demographic variables that have been consistently tested in cultivation analysis including race, gender, area of residence, and firsthand experience (Grabe & Drew, 2007). Although these variables are examined in this study, personal experience seems to have the most relevance for potential criminal justice practitioners. "Differences in real-world experiences and the factors shaping such experiences contribute to the variations in perceptions of reality" (Cohen & Weimann, 2000, p. 101). Gerbner (1998) refers to these experiences as "resonance". This combination of personal interaction and direct experience plays a role in cultivation effects. For this study, it was essential to control for those respondents who have experience with the criminal justice system (i.e., employees, interns, victims, offenders, or personal relationships with one who works within the system).

The research is focused on the role that television may play on students' perceptions. Therefore, the amount of television watched as well as types and amount of crime-related programming watched are significant variables to determine what effect, if any, television may have on students' perceptions.

2.2 Sample

A list of offered courses was obtained from the university class schedule website. The sample for this study was undergraduate students at a Northwestern university. This student sample was grouped according to major: criminal justice and other. A stratified cluster sampling design was used for this study, which created two lists. There was a list of courses within the CCJ program and another list of university studies required courses. These lists were also grouped on class status (e.g., lower division and upper division). For this study, the number of courses chosen for each stratum was representative of the population size of students within that stratum. A sample of possible classes was randomly selected from each of these lists. Each course selected served as a cluster of participants who were asked to voluntarily participate in this study. After the class had been randomly selected from either the CCJ course list or university studies course list, a letter was sent to the appropriate instructor of that course to ask permission to administer the questionnaire to their students. Any student who was in multiple courses was asked to not participate the second or any subsequent time. Furthermore, any student who was under 18 years old also was instructed not to participate. Based on these factors, a total of 465 surveys were distributed, of which 72 were blank or partially completed (15.5%). Therefore, the final sample was 393 (84.5%).

2.3 Questionnaire Construction

The key variables for this research are related to the criminal justices system and previous cultivation research. This study also was interested in students' perceptions of the criminal justice system and their attitudes. Cultivation research deems these as "first order" and "second order" effects, respectively (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Shrum, 1999). First order effects ask respondents to make a quantitative judgment based on memory recall. For instance, what percentages of robberies lead to an arrest? Second order effects determine the respondent's attitude or beliefs. For example, are you afraid someone will break into your home? In order to test these effects, this study also asked participants questions regarding a variety of topics such as roles and duties of police officers, attorneys, judges, forensic technicians, and forensic scientists. Additionally, the prevalence of scientifically produced evidence and crime labs was examined. The respondents also were asked to answer questions pertaining to their perceptions of clearance rates, and crime rates. Finally, participants were asked if they have ever participated within the criminal justice system as a juror, witness, victim, or defendant.

2.4 Dependent Variables

For this study, there were four dependent variables that were examined in various models. They all fall under the category of perception of social reality about crime and the criminal justice system. The first dependent variable was perceptions about police officers and their responsibilities. Dantzker and Waters (1999) explored the relationship between criminal justice courses and perceptions of policing. Their 14 item questionnaire had high internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = .80). They used a 5 point Likert scale ranging from -2 (extremely disagree) to +2 (extremely agree). The same 14 statements were used in this study to determine participants' perceptions of policing, but the Likert scale range was changed to 1 (extremely disagree) through 5 (extremely agree) to retain consistency in the questionnaire.

Additionally, students were asked to give their perception of clearance rates by writing out the number of times a person is arrested out of 100 incidents of a particular type of crime. For each of the students' responses, their estimate was subtracted from the FBI's reported clearance rate, the result was squared and then the square root was calculated. The elimination of negatives was essential in determining the total error for all index crimes. If a student overestimated the clearance of homicide by 25 and underestimated robbery by 25, it would appear that the student estimated correctly the total clearance rate. Thus, negatives were removed to capture the total error of their estimations of eight index crime. After each of the eight index differences were calculated, the scores were added to create a clearance rate total error rate. Similarly, students were asked to give their perceptions of violent crime and property crime rates over the past 10 years. These were summed and made into a summative scale.

Finally, students were asked to give their perceptions of the prevalence of particular types of evidence that are found and collected at crime scenes. These answers were compared to Peterson, Sommers, Johnson, and Baskin's (2009) National Institute of Justice research pertaining to the role and impact of forensic evidence. The estimates were subtracted from Peterson et al.'s findings, squared and square-rooted, to provide absolute differences. Similar to the total error for clearance rates, each of the four different evidence types were summed to create a total error score for forensic evidence.

2.5 Independent Variables

2.5.1 Media Factors. Grabe and Drew (2007) measured media factors by asking respondents about the number of times they watched television in the past week. Using the number of days per week allows interval scales. This study asked students the number of hours on average they watch television per week, the number of hours per week they watch fictional crime-related programming, and the number of hours per week they watch non-fictional crime-related programming. Other questions asked how often students watch specific programs such as particular crime dramas and/or reality crime programs.

2.5.2 Educational Factors. The groups of independent variables that are most relevant to this study are educational factors. That is, a student's major, class status, and the number of CCJ courses taken. Thus, being a CCJ major should mediate the impact of media on their perceptions of the criminal justice system. It is thought that those students with CCJ majors should be better able to distinguish between false depictions and reality. Questions measuring these variables asked respondents to select their perceived class status, their major and/or minor, and the number of criminal justice courses taken. Students with non-CCJ majors were asked to write their major on a space provided. If CCJ students watch more crime-related programming, it would be essential to determine if they have more accurate beliefs about the criminal justice system compared to non-CCJ students.

2.5.3 Demographic Factors. Seven demographic variables have been consistently used in cultivation studies (Shrum, 2004). Specifically, these include sex, age, education, income, race, geographic location, and living situation (i.e., living alone or with others). Since the sample consisted of enrolled college students, income and education were not measured. Respondents were asked to identify their sex, their age, their race, the geographic location of their permanent residence, and how many people live in that permanent residence.

2.5.4 Personal Experience Factors. Personal experience is another variable that is essential to analyzing potential cultivation effects (Gerber, 1998). “Differences in real-world experiences and the factors shaping such experiences contribute to the variations in perceptions of reality” (Cohen & Weimann, 2000, p. 101). First hand experiences encompass a few different types of questions. Students were asked if they had ever participated within the criminal justice system in a number of different roles. Additionally, students were asked if anyone in their household was employed within the criminal justice system. These questions were dummy coded yes/no in a criminal justice participation variable of experience if a respondent selected yes to any of the criminal justice system participation questions. Additionally, participants were asked if they were ever a victim of a number of crimes through the use of multiple questions pertaining to different types of possible victimization experiences. These questions were dummy coded yes/no to create a prior victimization variable if a respondent answered yes to any of the questions.

3. Results

The results of this study were based on a sample of 393 undergraduate students at a public liberal arts university in the Northwest.

3.1 Frequencies and Descriptive Statistics

3.1.1 Independent Variables. Twelve independent variables were examined for their possible influence/impact on the dependent variables. Table 1 provides the frequencies as well as the percentages of these independent variables. Males comprised 43.3% of the sample and females 56.7%. This breakdown was very close to the university’s gender distribution, where males accounted for 41.2% of the student population and females accounted for 58.8% in the spring term (Office of Institutional Research, 2012). The mean age for the sample was 22.44 years, while the median age of the student body in the spring 2011 term was 24.36 (Office of Institutional Research).

For this sample, the vast majority of respondents were white (83.5%). Because of the lack of numbers within the other race categories, all non-white respondents were collapsed into the same category¹. The Office of Institutional Research (2012) reported that whites made up 70.4% of the student body, while Latinos made up 6.3%, Blacks 1.8%, and other races/ethnicities made up 21.5%.

Also of note, rural respondents consisted of 35% of the sample, while urban respondents were 13.8% and suburban respondents were 51.2%. Due to low urban numbers, the categories of urban and suburban respondents were collapsed. Since there were a number of questions that sought past criminal victimizations, any prior victimizations were collapsed into a new variable called “any victimization” (81.2% of respondents had been victimized). The variable personal and/or vicarious criminal justice experience contains those who participated as an intern, employee, witness, juror, or live with someone who worked within the criminal justice system. This was done mainly because of low reporting numbers (33.8% of respondents had either vicarious or personal experience within the criminal justice system), but there were no significant differences in these groups across the outcome variables. However, there was a significant difference of means in fear of victimization when a co-habitant worked within the criminal justice system.

The mean number of television hours watched per week was 10.47, which was well below the national average. According to the World Almanac (2011), Americans consume over 34 hours of television viewing per week.

3.2 Bivariate Correlations

Bivariate correlations were conducted to examine the impact each of the independent variables on the dependent variables. Correlations were also used to determine if there was any multicollinearity among independent variables. Perceived Class status had a significant correlation with age ($r = .451, p < .01$) and a large correlation with the number of CCJ courses ($r = .516, p < .01$).

¹ An independent sample t test was run on the collapsed race variable. Significance occurred for only one of the variables of interest (Perceptions of Crime Rate)

Thus, perceived class status was removed to prevent multicollinearity problems in the models. Furthermore, CCJ Major or Minor had a significantly large correlation with the number of CCJ courses variable ($r = .762$, $p < .01$); the CCJ Major or Minor variable was also removed.

3.3 RQ Findings

The dependent variables for this study included perceptions of police, perceptions of crime rates, perceptions of crime labs, perceptions of the prevalence of forensic evidence, and perceptions of clearance rates. The perceptions of police, perceptions of crime rate, perceptions of clearance rates, and perceptions of forensic evidence were additive scales. Table 2 contains the descriptive statistics for the dependent variables.

3.3.1 RQ1 Perception of Police. The first question, respondents' perceptions about police officer duties and responsibilities will significantly differ based on the amount of time spent viewing crime-related television programs, was tested. Table 3 displays the results. The variables that were significant at the level of .05 or less were non-fictional crime-related television watching, age, race, number of CCJ courses, and personal or vicarious criminal justice experience. Older students tend to have more negative perceptions of police ($b = 0.145$). These results indicated that non-white respondents had a more negative perception of police than white respondents ($b = -5.535$). Students who have taken more CCJ courses tend to have a more positive perception of police ($b = -1.576$). Students with criminal justice experience as an intern, employer, witness, juror, or live with someone employed by the system have more favorable perceptions of police ($b = -1.976$). Based on beta weights the number of CCJ courses had the strongest impact on perception of police, followed by race, non-fictional crime-related television watching, criminal justice experience, and age respectively. When controlling for all of the independent variables, only non-fictional crime-related television watching was significant in explaining much variation in regards to perceptions of police officers. The first hypothesis concerning the variables of interest and perceptions of police was supported by this study.

3.3.2 RQ2 Perception of Forensic Evidence Prevalence. The second tested hypothesis claimed that respondents' perceptions about the prevalence of forensic evidence will significantly differ based on the amount of time spent viewing crime-related television programs. Table 4 displays the results.

The three independent variables that were significant at the .05 level or less were fictional television watching, sex, and number of CCJ courses. Those who watch more fictional crime-related drama tended to have more error in their belief of forensic evidence prevalence ($b=2.862$, $p < .01$). Additionally, females had more inaccurate perceptions of the prevalence of forensic evidence ($b = -26.583$, $p < .01$). Finally, those students who have taken more CCJ courses had a smaller forensic evidence total error term ($b = -10.534$, $p < .01$). Based on beta weights, the number of CCJ courses had the strongest impact on perception of forensic evidence prevalence followed by sex and then fictional television watching hours.

The second question, which claimed that respondents' perceptions about the prevalence of forensic evidence will significantly differ based on the amount of time spent viewing crime-related television programs, was supported but it had the least impact of the significant variables. The number of CCJ courses and sex impacted perceptions of forensic evidence prevalence more than fictional crime-related television viewing.

3.3.3 RQ3 Perceptions of Clearance Rate. The third question sought the impact of crime-related television viewing and the perception of clearance rates. Table 5 displays the results of the regression. Three independent variables were significant at the .05 level. Students who spent more hours watching no crime-related television had less error in estimating clearance rates ($b = -1.256$). Respondents who lived with more people tended to have higher total error scores for their perception of clearance rate ($b = 7.064$). Additionally, those students who were victims had higher to total error scores, which means that they overestimated the clearance rates of index crimes ($b = -24.422$). When controlling for all of the independent variables, the only media consumption variable that was significant was total television consumption.

The third question, which claimed that respondents' perceptions about clearance rates (of crimes reported) will differ based on the amount of time spent viewing crime-related television programs, was not supported by this study. The beta weights revealed that victimization had the largest influence on the dependent variable, but no crime-related television watching and the number of co-occupants were close behind. Surprisingly, the study suggested a negative relationship. Namely, those students who watch more non crime-related television tended to have more accurate estimates of clearance rates

3.3.4 RQ4 Perceptions of Crime Rate. The fourth hypothesis claimed that respondents' perceptions about reported crime rates will differ based on the amount of time spent viewing crime-related television programs. A regression was conducted to test this hypothesis and included all of the independent variables. Table 6 displays the results. There were two independent variables that impacted the variance of the perception of crime rate, but none of the media variables were significant.

Based on the results, non-whites thought that crime was increasing ($b = -.548, p < .05$). Comparatively, those who had taken the least amount of CCJ courses also thought that crime was increasing ($b = -.425, p < .01$). The beta weights revealed that the number of CCJ courses had a bigger influence on the perception than race and none of the television variables had any significant impact. The fourth hypothesis claimed that respondents' perception about crime rates would differ based on the amount of time spent watching crime-related television programming. However, this hypothesis was not supported by this study. Again, the variables of interest were not significant in explaining the variance in respondents' perception of crime rates.

4. Discussion

In general, it appeared that crime-related television viewing had very little impact on any of the dependent variables. Overall, the amount of time spent watching fictional crime-related programming had an impact on the perceptions of forensic evidence prevalence and the amount of time watching non-fictional crime-related programming had an impact on perceptions of police. These were the only hypotheses supported by the research. Moreover, general television viewing, but not crime-related television viewing, impacted the perceptions of clearance rates. Thus, there were only two hypotheses that were significantly impacted by the media variables of interest. Although these hypotheses were impacted by the variables of interest, other independent variables had stronger influences on perceptions of forensic evidence.

Overall, the impact of watching any crime-related programming impacted students' perceptions of forensic evidence prevalence and perceptions of police, which mirrors previous research. When controlling for other independent variables, it seemed that crime-related television viewing did not impact students' perceptions of clearance rates or perceptions of crime rates. Other television viewing had the strongest influence on students' perceptions of clearance rates, even when all other independent variables were controlled. However, the two supported hypotheses had other independent variables with stronger influences on the dependent variables than watching crime-related television programming.

4.1 Perception of Police and Other Criminal Justice Employers

This study wanted to uncover the relationship between the amount of television viewing, specifically crime-related programming, and various perceptions concerning the criminal justice system. It was hypothesized that the amount of crime-related television watched would impact students' perceptions and beliefs of police and other criminal justice personnel. As the results of this study indicated, students' perceptions of police were impacted by the number of CCJ courses, race, non-fictional crime-related television viewing, criminal justice experience, and age. Although the hypothesis was supported, other independent variables had more of an impact.

Simply put, in this study, students who took more CCJ courses had more favorable perceptions of police. These results were similar to the findings by Dantzker & Waters (1999), who found significant differences of favorable perceptions towards police between students who took criminal justice classes versus those who did not. This was not too much of a surprise since many students who are interested in studying the discipline of criminal justice seek jobs within the field.

The result of this study found that race impacted perceptions and beliefs about police officers. As mentioned in earlier, this finding mirrors the claim that "race is one of the most consistent predictors of attitudes toward and reported experience of the police and other criminal justice institutions" (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004, p. i). Race had the second strongest impact on perceptions of police in this study. Specifically, self-identified minorities had more negative perception/attitudes towards police.

Moreover, this research supported previous cultivation research pertaining to personal and/or vicarious experience in forming perceptions of reality (Cohen & Wieman, 2000; Gerbner, 1998; and Grabe & Drew, 2007). Overall, those who participated in the criminal justice system as an intern, employee, witness, juror or who live with someone who is employed by the criminal justice system tended to have more positive perceptions and attitudes toward police.

Cultivation theory claimed that television viewing has an incremental, consistent, and cumulative effect. Hence, older television watchers should have acquired these “cultivations” over a longer period of time. The results of this study found that age was statistically significant in explaining the variance in perception of police. Specifically, older participants had more negative attitudes/perceptions about police than younger participants. This result mirrors previous cultivation research that studied the effects of different genres instead of general television viewing consumption (Cohen & Weimann, 2000).

4.2 Perception of the Prevalence of Forensic Evidence

It was hypothesized that crime-related television viewing would impact student perceptions of the prevalence of forensic evidence at crime scenes. The results indicated that perceptions of forensic evidence prevalence were impacted by the number of CCJ courses, sex, and fictional crime-related television watching; thus, there is support for the hypothesis that crime-related television impacts the perceptions about forensic evidence. Although student perceptions pertaining to how often forensic evidence was gathered at crime scenes, the results specify that CCJ coursework and sex have a more significant impact. Nonetheless, the more fictional crime-related television programming that students watched impacted their perception of how often certain types of evidence were found at crime scenes.

These findings would lend support to the cultivation theory’s emphasis on incremental, consistent, and cumulative influences on viewers’ perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs (for an overview of cultivation analysis see Morgan & Shanahan, 1997; Gerbner, 1998). Since fictional crime-related television programming was significant in explaining the variance within perceptions of forensic evidence prevalence, it emulates the findings of previous research that television programming can contribute to high expectations (Shelton, Kim, & Barak, 2006).

Again, this research supports the claim the crime-related content, especially fictitious accounts, contribute to high expectations of the pervasiveness forensic evidence.

4.3 Perception of Clearance Rates

Additionally, this research conjectured a relationship between crime-related television media and perceptions of clearance rates. This study indirectly supported the hypothesis that crime-related television watching would impact student perceptions of clearance rates. Although both measures of crime-related television program viewing were found to not be statistically significant, general television watching was found to be statistically significant. Moreover, general television watching had the strongest impact on perceptions of clearance rates, followed by past victimization, and co-occupants. Interestingly, the less television students watched the less total error they had in their perceptions of clearance rates. Simply, this indicated that those students who watch more television (of any type) tended to have more error in their perceptions of clearance rates of the FBI’s index crimes. There may be some limitation to how clearance rates were measured, which is addressed later in the chapter.

4.4 Perception of Crime Rates

This study found that the number of CCJ courses and race were the only variables that were statistically significant regarding perception of crime rates. Thus, this study did not support the findings of Goidel et al.’s (2006) assessment of television viewing’s impact on perceptions of crime rates. Although their study found a significant impact of news watching on perceptions of juvenile crime and overall crime, this study found no such relationship but local/national news is different than the non-fictional crime-related television program this study measured. Again, this may be accredited to the sample demographics and/or measuring non-fictional crime-related television content.

4.5 Role of Criminal Justice Education

This research also wanted to explore the impact of education on perceptions of various criminal justice topics. Since the CJ Major/Minor variable and the number of CCJ courses variable were highly correlated, only the number of CCJ courses variable was used for the four different models. Overall, it cannot be understated that the number of CCJ courses impacted three of the four tested hypotheses (the lone exception was perceptions of clearance rates). Furthermore, the number of CCJ courses had the strongest impact on perceptions of police, perception of forensic evidence, and perception of crime rates. Overall, it seemed that the number of CCJ courses that a student completed was the most significant variable in this study

4.6 Importance of This Research

First and foremost, this research supported the idea that education works. Of all the variables, the number of criminal justices classes taken was significant in three of the four hypotheses and was the most influential variable in three hypotheses. It seems that education-specific class work corrects many myths that television programming can portray. Thus, many students who were interested in criminal justice related fields based on media portrayals that attend colleges or universities can be educated on the myths that are expressed on popular television shows. However, it is difficult to ascertain whether students take it upon themselves to “fact-check” television content after watching it or if they discuss content in and out of the classroom. In today’s informational age, students have to ability to “Google” presented information found on television programs as well as what is taught in college classrooms.

Informational literacy is an important skill for students. At this time, it is possible for students to access journal articles, government publications, books, magazines, and so on from their computer, tablet, or even their smart phone. Perhaps professors need to introduce students to media literacy too.

Media literacy involves focusing on a critical position and becoming engaged with the varying instruments and different forms of culture. All in all, media literacy and the critical process involve description, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and engagement. In fact, it is a process that separates accrual of information from actually becoming media literate (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 2011, p. 30).

Mass media is ubiquitous and plays a substantial role in the lives of many Americans. The content on television can educate and indoctrinate the audience. This research was interested in the possible impact of crime-related television content on a number of perceptions of the criminal justice system. If television educated the audience or indoctrinated the audience, then those who watch crime-related television more often would have a more distorted view of reality.

Although there were cultivation effects on perceptions of police, perceptions of forensic evidence, and perceptions of clearance rates, the TV as “media” in this study did not have the strongest impact on any dependent variables. Only the perception of clearance rates was influenced most by a television viewing variable (general watching). This result would indicate that there are other variables that are more important in understanding perception of police, perception of the prevalence of forensic evidence, and perception of crime rates. This begs the question: what variables are missing from the models?

It is nearly impossible to control for all of the intimately inter-related information that can besiege a student. Many of the traditional university students were raised in an environment where television was a central component in their lives. However, many also were raised with the internet, which has become a vast repository of information that can permeate their existence. Information (good or bad) can be pursued within seconds from anywhere; data no longer are housed entirely in libraries. In addition, there are significant differences in how one consumes information. Specifically, reading text has a different effect on the brain than watching video (Burbules & Callister, 2000). Thus, the genesis of criminal justice related themes may be murky for students to recollect and process. Yet, if one needs to find the correct answer, he or she can consult their smart phone and/or computer in a matter of seconds to read or to watch.

Although the medium of a television set seems to be self-explanatory, “the biggest technical innovations in TV are non-television delivery systems. We can now watch our favorite shows on DVRs after they first air, or on laptops for free or for a nominal cost, or on smart-phones” (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 2011, p. 169). These are known as third screens (Movie theaters are first screens and traditional television sets are second screens). As these new third screens are becoming more popular and more inexpensive, a new generation of citizens can experience the world on-demand 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There will be no more waiting for a sitcom to come on at 9:00pm when one can watch it any time after the original airing.

If there is a cultivation effect in contemporary society it seems to be insignificant for many of the tested hypotheses. It appears that college professors do a better job of educating students on criminal justice themes than television does, but television still plays a role in forming one’s idea of what is reality. More and more students are declaring criminal justice majors based on portrayals of the criminal justice professions on television or on the internet. New forensic studies programs and new forensic science programs have already been created within the university culture.

In addition to cultural changes in information availability, the aspect of experience still rings true. Prior working experience and/or prior victimization experience impacted students' beliefs and perceptions of police, perceptions of clearance rates, and fear of victimization. Although the number of criminal justice course had more of an impact, the student's experience was nonetheless significant in their assumptions and beliefs.

This research points to the idea that TV content can have an impact on some students' perceptions, although it is not that strong. Additionally, education within the classrooms seemed to improve First order effects and develop more positive Second order effects on criminal justice agents. However, what if students took an "online" class? Would this new type of course delivery impact perceptions differently? As we move further in to the 21st century, a convergence of content AND delivery systems are inevitable. Thus, we need to know where and how individuals are obtaining their news and information. Perhaps this is the most important finding of this study.

4.7 Limitations

The most glaring limitation of this research was the sample of college students. Payne and Chappell (2008) went into great detail regarding the strengths and weaknesses of using student samples in criminological research. With regards to weaknesses, they included 1) concerns about validity, 2) ethical considerations, 3) stigmatization of student samples, and 4) generalizability.

One validity issue stems from when the surveys were administered. The researcher conducted his research during the final two weeks of the term. As such, students may have been "just filling it out without giving concern to the items addressed on the survey" (Payne & Chappell, 2008, p. 185). There also were crime-related and victimization-related questions that may not have been answered honestly for fear that the researcher may find out about their responses.

Perhaps the most apparent validity threat was the statistical conclusion validity of measurement error. There were a few constructs that may have been inadequately explicated. For instance, respondents were asked to estimate their perception of clearance rates for each of the FBI's index crimes by using arrest only. However, the FBI's clearance rate uses exceptional means and arrests to designate a clearance rate for a particular crime.

Another threat was to construct validity of the variables of interest. This dissertation was interested in the impact of television and asked students to estimate their television viewing habits. Today's "television" may not be the same "television" as it was 20-30 years ago. There are other forms of media that broadcast, sell, rent, and stream the same content that is on television; Netflix and Hulu are companies that offer instant streaming of movies and/or television programs. In fact, event networks broadcast their content online after the program has aired on television. It is hard to determine, or even guess, whether or not students who watch programs on these websites consider it "television-viewing". To add to the complexity of conceptualizing and operationalizing "television-viewing", those aforementioned companies' websites – in addition to youtube.com – allow people to watch sections of television shows and specific scenes from movies without having to watch them in their entirety. Again, students may not interpret watching sections of television programs as watching the show because they only watched part of the show. If students only considered the television set and no other forms of media, the television viewing variables would be incorrectly measured.

In 2009, there were 8.7 million desktops, 28 million laptops/netbooks/tablets sold, and 41.2 million smartphones sold in the United States (Digital Future Report, 2011). Furthermore, 82% of all Americans (12 years or older) had internet access in 2009 with an average of 19 hours spent online per week (Digital Future Report, 2011). According to The CTIA Semi-Annual Industry Survey (as cited in *The World Almanac*, 2011), there were over 285 million Americans with wireless phones. Many of these devices – smartphones – have the ability to stream television-like programming. There were no questions that tried to separate watching programming on television versus online through desktops, laptops, tablets, smart phones, or other streaming devices. Technological advancements may have changed how people use information.

However, if one were to assume the television viewing variables were measured correctly, the mean for total television viewing for this sample was 10.19 hours. According to Nielsen Media Research (as cited in *The World Almanac and Book of Facts*, 2011), men watch an average of 34:24 per week and women watch an average of 38:46 per week. If one considered the 18-24 year old age group, men watch 23:59 per week and women watch 27:57 per week. In either case, it appears this sample was well below the national average. There could be many reasons for the discrepancy. For example, there may be regional difference of television viewing by state and a comparison to the national average may not be an accurate portrayal of television viewing.

Also, the principle investigator was a university professor who administered the survey instrument to students at a university. Hence, many students may have underreported their television viewing for fear of being judged for watching too much television.

This study may also external validity issues, specifically the lack of generalizability. Payne and Chappell (2008) noted that “students 1) are younger, 2) have a different set of life experiences, 3) have different interests, 4) come from a different income bracket, and 5) are a distinct subculture” (p. 185). The mean age for the sample was 22.44 years. Thus, it may be inappropriate to generalize the findings to the entire population. However, this research was focused primarily on whether or not television impacted students’ perception of various subjects within criminal justice. Therefore, the intent of this study was not to generalize the findings to the entire population; rather to generalize the findings to all students.

Students may in fact have a different set of life experiences, different interests, and a distinct subculture. If we consider the mean age of the study, most of the students were born in the 1990s. Technological advancements in communication and reliance upon the internet became much more important during the 1990s and continued through the early part of the 21st century. Five percent of U.S. households had a cellular phone in 1990, but 90% of U.S. households had a cellular phone in 2009 (Consumer Electronics Association, 2011). As alluded to before, students may watch television programming on the internet but not consider it television watching. Moreover, television viewing increases with age but internet usage decreases with age (World Almanac, 2011). Thus, it seems that younger Americans use the internet far more frequently than older Americans.

4.8 Future Research

While this research sought the impact of television on perceptions of various issues within criminal justice, it became apparent that the scope of media may far exceed television viewing alone. The internet has drastically changed our world and future studies focusing on media effects must control for internet usage and content.

Additionally, the perceptions of the reliability of certain types of forensic evidence should be measured. According to this study, crime-related television programming impacted viewers’ beliefs about forensic evidence prevalence. However, it also may affect their beliefs about the accuracy of the same evidence. Many types of forensic evidence and the procedures for their analysis have been labeled as “junk science” (Cooley, 2007; Mann, 2005; Stephens, 2007). It would be interesting to determine if crime-related programming increases or decreases viewers’ perceptions of accuracy of forensic evidence.

Overall, this study sought to understand the potential impact of television on various issues related to the criminal justice system and its agents. Based on the results of this study, crime-related television programming impacted students’ perceptions about forensic evidence prevalence, students’ perceptions of clearance rates, and students’ fear of victimization, but the media variables of interest were not significant in accounting for the variance in perceptions of police, perceptions of crime rates, or knowledge accuracy of the criminal justice system.

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Table 1

Variable	Code	Mean	Frequency	Percent
Sex	0 = Female		223	56.7
	1 = Male		170	43.3
Age		22.41		
Race	0 = Other		65	16.5
	1 = White		328	83.5
No. of CCJ Courses	0		132	33.6
	3-Jan		116	29.5
	7-Apr		55	14
	10-Aug		28	7.1
	11+		62	15.8
Town	0 = Rural		137	34.9
	1 = Urban		256	65.1
Co-occupants		3.2		
Any Victimization	0 = No		74	18.8
	1 = Yes		319	81.2
CJ Experience	0 = No		260	66.2
	1 = Yes		133	33.8
Total of any TV watching		6.28		
Fictional crime-related TV watching only		2.61		
Non-fictional crime-related TV watching only		1.58		

Table 2

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Actual Minimum	Actual Maximum
Perceptions of Police	26.87	7.715	11	53
Fear of Victimization	12.24	3.844	6	24
Perceptions of Crime Rate	6.42	1.908	2	10
Perception of Forensic Evidence Total Error	128.51	82.15	11.9	334.5
Perception of Clearance Rate Total Error	197.95	81.388	54.6	471

Table 3

	<i>b</i>	S.E.	Beta	t
(Constant)	34.117	2.315		14.735
Total of non-crime TV watching	-0.059	0.046	-0.062	-1.295
Fictional crime-related TV watching	0.051	0.096	0.026	0.531
Non-fictional crime-related TV watching	-.389*	0.16	-0.125	-2.44
Sex	0.303	0.737	0.02	0.411
Age	.145*	0.07	0.102	2.133
Race	-5.535**	0.98	-0.267	-5.638
No. of CCJ Courses	-1.576**	0.27	-0.29	-5.861
Town	-0.338	0.751	-0.021	-0.45
Co-occupants	-0.328	0.267	-0.058	-1.266
Any Victimization	0.642	0.916	0.033	0.7
CJ Experience	-1.976*	0.78	-0.121	-2.528

$R^2 = .190$
 $F = 8.104$
 $p < .000$
NOTE:
* Significance at the .05 level
** Significance at the .01 level

Table 4

	<i>b</i>	S.E.	Beta	t
(Constant)	160.096	26.31		6.085
Total of non-crime TV watching	0.451	0.52	0.044	0.868
Fictional crime-related TV watching	2.862**	1.088	0.138	2.631
Non-fictional crime-related TV watching	-1.842	1.813	-0.055	-1.016
Sex	-26.583**	8.37	-0.16	-3.18
Age	0.667	0.774	0.044	0.863
Race	-11.66	11.15	-0.053	-1.046
No. of CCJ Courses	-10.534**	30.55	-0.18	-1.45
Town	-7.063	8.535	-0.041	-0.828
Co-occupants	3.29	3.039	0.054	1.083
Any Victimization	-17.725	10.41	-0.084	-1.702
CJ Experience	5.342	8.883	0.031	0.601

$R^2 = .086$
 $F = 3.246$
 $p < .000$
NOTE:
* Significance at the .05 level
** Significance at the .01 level

Table 5

	<i>b</i>	S.E.	Beta	t
(Constant)	247.362	26.456		9.35
Total of non-crime TV watching	-1.256*	0.522	-0.12	-2.4
Fictional crime-related TV watching	-1.131	1.094	-0.055	-1.034
Non-fictional crime-related TV watching	0.643	1.823	0.019	0.353
Sex	4.277	8.417	0.026	0.508
Age	-0.649	0.778	-0.043	-0.834
Race	-16.352	11.212	-0.074	-1.458
No. of CCJ Courses	-4.898	3.072	-0.085	-1.594
Town	-3.578	8.583	-0.021	-0.417
Co-occupants	7.064*	3.056	0.116	2.311
Any Victimization	-24.422*	10.47	-0.17	-2.33
CJ Experience	-5.03	8.933	-0.029	-0.563
$R^2 = .068$				
$F = 2.539$				
$p < .004$				
NOTE:				
* Significance at the .05 level				
** Significance at the .01 level				

Table 6

	<i>b</i>	S.E.	Beta	t
(Constant)	7.35	0.597		12.321
Total of non-crime TV watching	-0.007	0.012	-0.029	-0.588
Fictional crime-related TV watching	0.019	0.025	0.039	0.759
Non-fictional crime-related TV watching	0.053	0.041	0.069	1.279
Sex	-0.295	0.19	-0.077	-1.555
Age	0.012	0.018	0.035	0.696
Race	-.548*	0.253	-0.107	-2.169
No. of CCJ Courses	-.425**	0.069	-0.317	-6.136
Town	0.236	0.194	0.059	1.217
Co-occupants	-0.042	0.069	-0.03	-0.612
Any Victimization	0.333	0.236	0.069	1.41
CJ Experience	0.066	0.201	0.017	0.329
$R^2 = .116$				
$F = 4.546$				
$p < .000$				
NOTE:				
* Significance at the .05 level				
** Significance at the .01 level				