

MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE

THE MEAN WORLD SYNDROME

Featuring George Gerbner and Michael Morgan

Study Guide Written by SCOTT MORRIS

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NOTE TO TEACHERS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we've structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We've also set it up to help you stay close to the video's main line of argument as it unfolds. The structure of the guide therefore mirrors the structure of the video, moving through each of the video's sections with a series of key summary points, questions, and assignments specific to that section.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of each section of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Discussion Questions provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for "free-writing" or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments for each section encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

For years, debates have raged among scholars, politicians, and concerned parents about the effects of media violence on viewers. Too often these debates have descended into simplistic battles between those who claim that media messages directly cause violence and those who argue that activists exaggerate the impact of media exposure altogether. *The Mean World Syndrome*, based on the groundbreaking work of media scholar George Gerbner, urges us to think about media effects in more nuanced ways. Ranging from Hollywood movies and prime-time dramas to reality programming and the local news, the film examines how media violence forms a pervasive cultural environment that cultivates in heavy viewers, especially, a heightened state of insecurity, exaggerated perceptions of risk and danger, and a fear-driven propensity for hard-line political solutions to social problems. This is a provocative and accessible introduction to cultivation analysis, media effects research, and the subject of media influence and media violence more generally.

PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS

1. How much media do you consume a day? Be sure to factor in all forms of media – including television, movies, video games, internet, mobile devices, newspapers, books, magazines, radio and others.
2. Do you think media content overall is too violent?
3. Do you think media violence affects your behavior? How so? Do you think media violence affects others you know?
4. Do you think violent crime is worse now or 10 years ago? Are you ever concerned about being a victim of a violent crime?
5. Do you think television affects how you view people from different races or ethnicities than your own? If so, how? If not, why not?

INTRODUCTION

Key Points

1. Since the 1920s, hundreds of studies and countless Congressional hearings have looked at the issue of media violence and its effects on viewers. Most of these have centered on whether we, as media consumers, imitate what we see on television and in the movies.
2. Communication scholar George Gerbner, through decades of research as Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, found that rather than making us more likely to commit violence, consuming media violence is more likely to make us scared of violence being done to us.
3. After being exposed to a tremendous and terrible amount of violence while serving in the US Army during World War II, Gerbner devoted his life to trying to understand violence – particularly how violent images consumed through media affect our consciousness and behavior.
4. The Cultural Indicators Project, created by Gerbner in the late 1960s, was formed to track media violence and measure its impact on the perceptions and attitudes of viewers.
5. Gerbner and his colleagues found that the effects of exposure to media violence are more complicated than previous studies accounted for. They found that the quality of the violence, or how it is portrayed, has as much of an impact on our perceptions as the sheer quantity of violence we see.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. Are the movies and TV programs you watch violent? Do you play violent video games? How violent are the TV programs you watch or the video games you play? Are there any common patterns or themes to this violence?
2. Why do you think Congress and many nongovernmental organizations spend so much time and energy studying the effects of media violence?
3. What are some examples you've seen or heard of people imitating what they've seen on TV, in the movies or video games?
4. What, according to Michael Morgan, is one of the major reasons George Gerbner decided to study the effects media violence has on our consciousness and behavior?

Assignments

1. According to Gerbner, we cannot escape our media environment – it surrounds and engulfs us. To test his theory, make a list of every piece of media you encounter in an entire day. From TV shows, to movies, video games, advertisements, billboards, radio, mobile devices. As you compile the list, think about how realistic it would be to remove media entirely from your life. What would that require? Would it be possible?

Based on your list, write a paper detailing whether you agree with George Gerbner's assertion or not. Can you escape media? What occurred to you while you were compiling the list – did any patterns emerge?

2. Watch the bonus feature on *The Mean World Syndrome* DVD entitled "Media as Storytellers: "Nothing To Tell But A Lot To Sell" (also available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIhqasb1chl>). Write a response paper in which you address at least two of the following questions: Why does Gerbner say that storytelling is so important to the evolution of human society? What power do a culture's storytellers wield? How has storytelling changed over human history? What is the electronic revolution? What role has advertising had in changing storytelling in the past 50-100 years?
3. Research the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) 2000 report *Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children: A Review of Self-Regulation and Industry Practices in the Motion Picture, Music Recording & Electronic Game Industries* (<http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2001/12/violence.shtm>). Then, in your own words, write up a two-part response that summarizes the report and evaluates it from the perspective of cultivation analysis. First, summarize the primary focus of the report and the FTC's main conclusions. Then write a critique of the report's focus and findings based on Gerbner's ideas.

A TIDAL WAVE OF VIOLENCE

Key points

1. According to Gerbner, the telling of stories, the cultivation of a sense of who we are, and what the world is like, has always been the principal shaper of human behavior.
2. Today, a handful of global conglomerates own and control the majority of media we see and determine what stories we are exposed to.
3. These conglomerates, interested primarily in turning a profit, often encourage writers and directors to produce material that will be easily translated on the international market. Violence, as well as sex, read the same in any language, whereas more complicated storylines that include dramatic or comedic elements, are more difficult to translate and understand in different languages and cultures.
4. Violent media images now inundate our homes through television, movies, the Internet, and other media so much that children now see about 8,000 murders by the end of elementary school, and about 200,000 murders by age 18.

5. Violence has always been present in storytelling and is sometimes necessary to the message of a particular story, artistic or journalistic feature. But what Gerbner finds troubling about today's violence is that it often lacks consequences, is glamorous or humorous, and leads to a happy ending – a highly unrealistic view of the actual consequences of violence.
6. For Gerbner, it is not simply the sheer number of violent acts in media that are important but the larger story this violent media tells, and, especially, how it reinforces and normalizes a certain worldview.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. What is a “global conglomerate”? What do you think Gerbner means when he says these conglomerates *control* the stories we see and hear?
2. Why, specifically, does Gerbner think the owners and managers of these conglomerates encourage violent programming?
3. What is “happy violence”? Explain. What are some examples of happy violence from movies and TV you've seen recently?
4. Gerbner says that violence has always existed in storytelling – from fairytales to Shakespeare. But he also says this violence is very different from much of what we see today. In Gerbner's view, how does the violence in these older stories differ from violence in many of today's programs and movies? Do you agree with this?
5. Media violence is often combined with humor in TV and movies. According to Gerbner, what are some of the effects of combining humor with violence?
6. Michael Morgan says that media violence, as a whole, across the entire media landscape, adds up to tell a story. What does he mean? What kinds of common stories does media violence tell?

Assignments

1. Break into groups of 3 or 4. Prepare to represent one side in a debate on the following proposition:

Violence in today's media is no different from the violence that has always existed in storytelling. From the ancient Greeks and Romans, Grimm's fairytales and even Shakespeare, there has always been violence in storytelling and today's media violence is no more harmful.

Your job is to make the best case you can either for or against this proposition. Regardless which side you are on, be sure to back up your position with a clear summary of Gerbner's argument regarding happy violence.

2. Watch the MEF movie *Consuming Kids: The Commercialization of Childhood*. Write a paper summarizing any connections you see between the key arguments of *Consuming Kids* and the key arguments of *The Mean World Syndrome*.

“IT’S LIKE A FISH IN THE WATER”

Key Points

1. No study has been able to demonstrate that viewing violent television programming leads to societal violence any more than other possible causes, such as poverty.
2. The first series of studies on this subject, the Payne Fund Studies (1929-1932), which focused on the influence Hollywood’s first talking motion pictures had on the minds of children, concluded that crime and violence in films had a powerful, direct, and lasting effect on children. But the study missed the bigger picture by focusing on immediate and short-term emotional reactions.
3. Orson Welles’ 1938 radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds* was reported to have caused widespread panic that aliens had actually invaded the planet, reinforcing fears that mass media could exercise an immediate and direct effect on audience behavior. It was later discovered, though, that the vast majority of listeners knew it was fiction and didn’t panic at all.
4. These studies, and other like them, focused on people’s reactions before and after being exposed to a particular media message. But, as Gerbner points out, with television there is no *before* – because we are born into a mediated environment, inundated by media images and messages from the day we’re born.
5. For Gerbner, the only way to study this kind of immersion is through the lens of what he calls “cultivation” – a perspective that takes account of how our entire conception of the world, and of ourselves, is in some sense shaped by the media messages and images that surround us.
6. In an effort to measure the effects of media on this level, Gerbner, through his work with the Cultural Indicators Project, generated surveys asking large groups of people a series of questions, many of which were designed to measure their level of fear and anxiety about the world.
7. These studies have repeatedly shown that those who watch the most television, what Gerbner calls “heavy viewers,” are likely to perceive the world as a more frightening and scary place than it actually is.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. Gerbner says that very few of us who watch violent media repeat or imitate the violence we’ve seen. So do you think he’s saying media violence is harmless? Explain.
2. According to Gerbner, media violence is not, on its own, a major contributing factor or root cause of actual violence. What does he think are some of the root causes of violence? What do you think of his assertion?
3. What are some examples of movies, TV shows, music, and video games that you’ve heard people mention as causing violence?
4. The Payne Fund Studies found that crime and violence in films had a powerful, direct, and lasting effect on children and “sowed the seeds for future nervous disorders.” But Gerbner and Morgan believe the study’s findings missed the bigger picture. Why?
5. What is the magic bullet theory? How and why is the famous mass panic that allegedly followed Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds* broadcast an example of the magic bullet theory?

6. How does the magic bullet theory differ from Gerbner's analysis?
7. What is cultivation theory, or cultivation analysis?
8. How does Marshall McLuhan's quote, "We don't know who discovered water, but we know it wasn't the fish," relate to cultivation analysis?
9. What was the main purpose behind the surveys conducted by Gerbner and the Cultural Indicators Project? What, specifically, do these kinds of cultivation surveys try to measure? What do they consistently find?
10. What do the terms light, medium, and heavy viewers mean? Why are they important to cultivation analysis?

Assignments

1. There have been many attempts to duplicate Orson Welles' 1938 radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds* to see if it would incite a similar, immediate mass reaction in audiences. To hear about some of the most famous recreations, listen to an episode of the radio show RadioLab entitled *War of the Worlds* (<http://www.radiolab.org/2008/mar/24/>), where hosts Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich detail many of the duplications. Take notes, and write reactions to the following questions: How do the recreations detailed on RadioLab differ from Welles' original 1938 broadcast? How did these recreations, in some cases, distort the listener's reactions? And finally, Gerbner calls TV and radio a passive medium, meaning we turn on the TV or radio and watch and listen passively; how did these radio broadcasts change that dynamic?
2. Research the Payne Fund Studies. How has the debate about the effects of media violence changed since these studies were done in the 1930s? How have the movies changed? If that study were conducted today, what types of media do you think researchers would look at? If you think movies would still be appropriate, which types of movies do you think would make most sense for researchers to look at? (Name some specific titles, as examples.) And beyond movies, do you think researchers would have to include other forms of media? If so, which? How would that work in this kind of study, given what the Payne Studies actually measured?
3. Research the controversy over the lyrics of Marilyn Manson's music in relation to the tragedy at Columbine High School in 1999. Do you think Marilyn Manson's music had a *direct* effect on the perpetrators of that crime? Either way, how does your take on this relate to Gerbner's analysis and cultivation theory? Write a response paper explaining your views and how they relate to the mean world syndrome. For reference, watch Michael Moore's documentary *Bowling For Columbine*, in which he interviews Marilyn Manson about this very issue.

THE MEAN WORLD SYNDROME

Key Points

1. To really grasp what Gerbner means by the mean world syndrome, it's important to taken into consideration the entire media landscape – how one kind of story or program blends into another to create and reinforce a distinct view and sense of the world.
2. The overall effect of heavy television viewing is that the world is a mean place, and that we're under constant danger and threat.
3. Research shows that some of the most sensational and terrifying stories on television air on our local news, which is the primary news source for 2/3 of all Americans. Studies show that 61% of all lead stories in local news broadcasts are dedicated to crime, fires, and disasters.
4. According to Gerbner, the mean world syndrome amounts to this: that the violence and danger that pervade our media landscape do not cause violence so much as they cause irrational fears about violence.
5. This may help explain why polls over the past two decades have consistently shown that people think violent crime is far worse than it actually is, and has been steadily rising, even though the exact opposite is true: violent crime has been dropping for a decade, and now sits at 30-year lows.
6. At the same time that violent crime rates have been dropping rapidly, gun sales have been on the rise – an indication that while violence may be down, fear of being a victim of violence is not.
7. Polls consistently show that 2/3 of people who believe crime to be a very serious problem get the majority of their news from television.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. What is the “mean world syndrome”?
2. In Gerbner and Morgan's view, how does news programming contribute to the mean world syndrome?
3. Why do you think news programming so often leads with stories of crime, fire, accidents, and disasters? The saying goes, “if it bleeds, it leads.” What does this saying mean? Why does this still persist, in your view?
4. What are some of the effects of “if it bleeds, it leads” from a cultivation analysis viewpoint?
5. Violent crime is down to record lows, but polls continually show that the majority of Americans think it is higher than ever. Why? How might the mean world syndrome contribute to this? If it's not explainable by the mean world syndrome, can you think of any other reasons that might explain this phenomenon of exaggerated fear of crime and violence?

Assignments

1. Take a look at one night of primetime television on the 24-hour news channels – CNN, FOX News, MSNBC, HLN and others. Track down the transcripts of these programs on Lexis Nexis to create a list of all the specific stories that aired in one night. Break your list into three columns – stories that you think have a positive effect on viewers, stories that you think have a neutral effect, and stories that you think add to general anxiety and fear. Write a response paper based on what you find and how it ties in to Gerbner's analysis. What do you think would be some of the effects on your life if you watched these programs every night?
2. Write a 1-2 page paper about the trend of falling violent crime rates. Why do you think crime rates are falling? Read Steven Levitt's paper from *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, titled *Understanding Why Crime Fell in the 1990s* (<http://pricetheory.uchicago.edu/levitt/Papers/LevittUnderstandingWhyCrime2004.pdf>). What are the conclusions he makes? Write a 1-2 page response paper about whether you agree or not and why.
3. Morgan implies that rising gun sales may be tied to a media system that makes people anxious, nervous, and scared of others. Others might argue that people just like guns, or that the desire to protect oneself by owning firearms is not irrational. Pick a side and defend it with evidence. Be sure to support your argument with specific examples and be able to cite your sources. Also, be able to account for the best opposition arguments to strengthen your own case.

MEAN PEOPLE

Key Points

1. Gerbner points out that most Americans live insulated lives with little to no interaction between people from different race and class backgrounds. The result, he says, is that a lot of our information about people who are different from us comes from inaccurate portrayals on television.
2. Hispanics, for example, account for 15% of the US population but are only portrayed by 6% of characters on television and these characters are often violent.
3. In news programming, the overwhelming majority of stories on Latinos focus solely on illegal immigration – with programs such as CNN's *Lou Dobbs Tonight* focusing on illegal immigration in upwards of 70% of its episodes – rendering regular, decent, law-abiding Latino citizens virtually invisible in media programming.
4. This distortion may be a reason why three-quarters of Americans say they feel more immigration leads to higher crime rates despite FBI crime statistics that show crime is at historic lows in major cities and border cities where immigration is at all-time highs.
5. Similarly, Muslims and Arabs are repeatedly linked with violence and terror in TV, movies, and the news – with one study showing that Hollywood portrayals of Arabs over the past century have been negative 90% of the time.
6. Over the past decade, the portrayal of torture has become increasingly common in television programming. And as these fictional instances of torture have

- increased, so has public approval of actual torture methods: In 2006, 48% of Americans believed torturing terror suspects was often or sometimes justified.
7. African-Americans represent about 14% of characters in television programming, which is approximately the same percent African-Americans represent in the real population.
 8. But African-Americans are portrayed in two very different ways: in television fiction, African-Americans are portrayed as healthier, wealthier, and more successful than characters in general; but on local news, African-Americans are twice as likely as whites to be shown as perpetrators of crime.
 9. The result of this “bifurcated image” is that heavy viewers are more likely to perceive African-Americans as violent than lighter viewers of television -- despite the reality that white people are 4.7 times more likely to be victimized by another white person than by a black person.
 10. This bifurcated image – the over-representation of the glowing, wealthy, successful African American in fictional programming and the over-representation of the menacing, violent African American criminal in news coverage – not only erases the vast middle of African American experience; it also affects public perceptions about how best to solve problems like inner-city poverty and crime.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. What are some of the things we learn about minority groups from television? In your view, do stereotypes still exist on TV and in the wider media culture? If so, what are the stereotypes? Give examples.
2. Latinos represent 15% of the US population but constitute only 6% of characters in TV and movies. What are some of the possible effects this might have?
3. Gerbner points out that the few depictions of Latinos on television and in movies are often violent. Why might this be? And what effect might this have, from a cultivation standpoint?
4. What are some of the ways the mean world syndrome creates mean people?
5. Some polls show as many as 48% of Americans believe that torture is often or sometimes justified. How much do you think movies and TV shows like 24 contribute to that number?
6. Michael Morgan references the “bifurcated image” of African-Americans on TV. What does he mean? How are African-American portrayals on TV bifurcated?
7. In your opinion, is there such a thing as a *healthy* sense of fear? Explain. And if you think so, when do you think fear of others tends to become unhealthy?

Assignments

1. Research Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan’s visit to the set of FOX’s 24. What did he reportedly ask producers to do? Write a paper exploring how this incident does or doesn’t fit into Gerbner’s ideas about television viewing and its effects on behavior.
2. Watch the MEF film *Reel Bad Arabs*. Write a paper explaining why, in your view, stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims continue to exist even though we have unlearned stereotypes of other minority groups. Keep in mind that these images go back many decades, long before September 11th, 2001.

3. Research the controversy over the proposed building of Park51 (often referred to as the “Ground Zero mosque”) a few blocks from the former World Trade Center site in Lower Manhattan. In what ways might the reaction to this proposal relate to the mean world syndrome? Write a paper examining this controversy in light of some of the key arguments of *The Mean World Syndrome*.

THE FALLOUT

Key Points

1. One result of the mean world syndrome is an insecure population that is more likely to accept harsh and hard-line solutions to social problems such as poverty and crime.
2. The mean world syndrome can also give viewers a paralyzing sense of panic that generates a need not only for personal security – in the form of home security systems and gated communities – but also for a stronger national security to defend from perceived outside threats.
3. The violent imagery that fills up mainstream television and film and news is likely to create in regular viewers a sense of fear and mistrust that is out of sync with reality.
4. Because the telling of stories, the cultivation of a sense of who we are, is the principal shaper of human behavior, the challenge now, Gerbner asserts, is to design a new media system that is more fair, equitable, just, and less damaging than the one we have today.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. Gerbner asserts that heavy television viewers demand more protection from the problems of society. What does he mean? What kind of protection? Why?
2. Gerbner says a scared and insecure population is not only more likely to imprison people, but to “imprison” itself. What does he mean by this? Do you agree?
3. How does the mean world syndrome sometimes rise to the level of shaping national security policy?
4. How might the mean world syndrome affect political elections? Give some examples.
5. How will watching *The Mean World Syndrome* change the way you watch or play violent media content?
6. What are Gerbner’s ideas for how to solve the problems of today’s media?

Assignments

1. Research incarcerations rates in the United States. How have they changed since the 1920s? How do incarceration rates in the US compare to other countries? We know that crime rates are falling – can the same be said for incarceration rates? Why do you think this is? Can some of this be attributed to the mean world syndrome? How so? Make sure to discuss any differences in rates among different races or classes that you come across in your research.

2. Go to the website <http://livingroomcandidate.org> and watch the following election commercials:
 - a. 1964 Lyndon B. Johnson “Peace Little Girl (Daisy)” ad (<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1964>)
 - b. Willie Horton ad from the Bush-Dukakis campaign in 1988 (<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1988>).
 - c. 2004 George W. Bush campaign “wolves” ad (<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2004>).

Why do you think ads like these are memorable? How do you think they play into the mean world syndrome? Watch other commercials on the site. Do you see any patterns that emerge, a thread connecting these election commercials?

3. In the end, Michael Morgan asks if the political images we see over and over again on our televisions – frightening images of a “mean world spiraling out of control” – have contributed to a sense of anxiety and fear that is overwhelming our ability to “think clearly, rationally, beyond a reasonable concern for security and the need to defend ourselves?” Do you agree with this? Write a paper giving a detailed response to Morgan’s question. And be sure to cite specific examples – from the film, and from current events – to back up and illustrate your points.

NOUNS (PEOPLE, PLACES, THINGS, IDEAS) TO KNOW:

GEORGE GERBNER (1919-2005) was one of the world's foremost authorities on the effects of media violence. After earning a Bronze Star during World War II, he rose to prominence as a scholar and professor, serving as dean of the Annenberg School for Communication for 25 years, presiding over the influential Cultural Indicators Research Project, and later establishing the Cultural Environment Movement, an international organization dedicated to democratizing media.

MICHAEL MORGAN is a professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He worked with George Gerbner for more than two decades, and has published widely on Cultivation Theory, the cultural and socializing effects of television, the international and intercultural effects of mass media, and the effects and functions of new media technology.

CULTIVATION THEORY is a social theory that examines the cumulative and overarching impact television has on the way we see the world.

MEAN WORLD SYNDROME is when people who consume a lot of media come to believe the world to be a more dangerous place than it actually is, creating a sense of anxiety, fear and anger that is out of proportion with reality. This insecurity often leads to a greater desire for protection from this perceived danger and threat.

CULTURAL INDICATORS PROJECT is a research group founded by George Gerbner in 1968 to track changes in television content, and to make sense of how those changes affect viewers' perceptions of the world. It is the longest continuous study of television content and its effects. The group's database compiled information on more than 3,000 television programs and 35,000 TV characters.

PAYNE FUND STUDIES (1929-1932) were a series of research studies performed to examine movies and their effects on children.

MARSHALL MCLUHAN (1911-1980) was a professor of English Literature and one of the foremost scholars in the study of media theory. He is purported to have coined the phrase, "We don't know who discovered water, but we know it wasn't the fish."

LIGHT VIEWERS are those who watch less than two hours of TV a day.

MEDIUM VIEWERS are those who watch between 2-4 hours of TV a day.

HEAVY VIEWERS are those who watch more than 4 hours of TV a day.