

1

A Cultivation Theory Perspective of Worldwide National Impressions of the United States

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Introduction

People form impressions of other nations and their people, often based on the most meager knowledge. What is the nature of these impressions and how might they be formed? We argue for the utility of using cultivation theory from communication literature to examine this problem (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli 1994). This theory is especially useful in regard to the role of the media in the formation of national impressions.

Some past studies have extended social psychology research on interpersonal and intergroup attitude formation to the formation of impressions about different countries (e.g., Tims and Miller 1986; D'Adamo and Garcia-Beaudoux 1993, 1995). Other studies have used multidimensional scaling, cluster analysis, or factor analysis to identify the major factors involved in impressions of nations (Johnson, Oliveira, and Barnett 1989; Johnson and Tims 1985; Klineberg 1941; Robinson and Heffner 1967; Sherman 1973). A third approach to studying national impressions has compared impressions of one's own group (autostereotyping) with perceptions by other groups (heterostereotyping) (Marin and Salazar 1985; McAndrew 1990; Nichols and McAndrew 1984). Traditionally, autostereotypes have been more positive and uniform than heterostereotypes, but not always. The present study measured both auto- and hetero-stereotypes of people from the United States.

Sources of the Impressions

One important research problem in the study of national impressions concerns identifying the sources of these impressions. One variable that has been investigated is contact with people from other groups (McGrady and McGrady 1976). Clearly, experience in a country, either through travel or residence, is a major factor, if such an experience exists. Contact with friends and other people from that country is another source. However, the effects of contact have not been consistent across the literature, no doubt due in part to the complexity of the construct of contact, the variety of the groups examined in the various studies, and the different methodologies used.

This inconsistency may also be due in part to a failure to consider other important variables. In particular, various forms of media compose another set of formative influences. One major component of this influence is news media, a major source of public information about other countries. Some studies have examined the impact of exposure to broadcast and print news on knowledge and attitudes about other countries (McNelly and Izcaray 1986; Perry 1987, 1990; Perry and McNelly 1988; Perry and Melson 1989). Persons who consume more media news have greater and more differentiated knowledge about other nations, and sometimes more positive and less xenophobic attitudes as well.

News is not the only media component, however. Entertainment programming on television, as well as movies, provides input to these national impressions, especially for countries that are frequent exporters of film and TV programming or are frequent settings for stories in such fiction. Although the effects of such fictional portrayals on national impressions have not been extensively studied, some research suggests that fictional portrayals of groups may actually have a greater effect on knowledge than do non-fictional portrayals, especially on those people with relatively less personal knowledge and experience with that particular group (Slater 1990; Tims and Miller 1986). This could be described by the availability heuristic, by which one makes decisions based on the ease to which examples can be generated (Tversky and Kahneman 1973).

Cultivation Theory

A useful way to conceptualize the role of the media in the formation of national impressions is through cultivation theory (see Gerbner et al. 1994 for a recent overview). This theory emphasizes the exposure to recurring patterns of stories, images, themes, and messages through media. It assumes an active role of the media consumer, whose interaction with the media comes to *cultivate* a world view or set of attitudes. In other words, what people see frequently on television is what they come to believe.

For example, people who watch more violent television believe the world is a more dangerous place than those who watch less TV (Gerbner and Gross 1976; Morgan 1983). Similarly, heavy viewers tend to have relatively more traditional gender-role conceptions (Morgan 1982, 1987) and hold more middle-of-the-road political views (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli 1982, 1984). The latter finding from the U.S. was also obtained in Britain (Piepe, Charlton, and Morey 1990) and Argentina (Morgan and Shanahan 1991, 1995). These findings support the idea that the messages offered by TV affect a person's world view or sense of reality.

In terms of national impressions, cultivation theory is a promising theoretical framework from which to view the media contribution to the socialization of attitudes about other countries. Considering both news and entertainment programming, the United States would seem to be country about which many people worldwide would have an impression, due to its high profile in international news and the popularity of U.S.-made movies and television programs worldwide. Thus it seems that people's impressions about the U.S. might be especially likely to reflect media influences or cultivation effects. Surprisingly, although there have been several cultivation-theory studies within different countries (see Signorielli and Morgan 1990, for several papers of this type), few have looked at perceptions about other specific nations. In one exception, heavy exposure to U.S. television was associated with an enhanced Israeli perception of the U.S. standard of living (Weimann 1984). Therefore, one of the main goals of the present research was to investigate the role that media play in the formation of national impressions about the United States.

The Present Research

The present research assessed impressions of the United States, as viewed from inside and outside that country. The first study tested how lifelong U.S. residents viewed (a) people from their own nation (autostereotype), and (b) their perception of the "media image" of their nation.

The second study assessed the impressions about the U.S. in people living in several other nations around the world (international stereotype). These impressions of people who have never been to the U.S. were then compared to (a) the perceived media image, and (b) the autostereotype assessed by Study 1. It was predicted that the international stereotypes of people who have never been to the U.S. would more closely fit the media image profile than the autostereotype profile, thus suggesting a formative role of media in national stereotypes.

In order to retain some control of factors such as education, age, and socioeconomic class, only university students were tested. Presumably, university

students would have at least as much access to influences other than television and movies as, and more possibly than most, other segments of many national populations. Because of a comparable educational level, as well as other commonalities of the university experience, one might also expect greater cross-cultural homogeneity worldwide than would be the case with a sample from the general population. Thus, if national differences occur across university students, such differences in more general samples should be highly likely and quite possibly much larger and even more media-influenced.

Study 1 Method: Autostereotype and Perceived Media Image

Participants were 348 introductory psychology students who participated for course credit. All had lived all or almost all their lives in the U.S. and were attending a diverse and comprehensive Midwestern U.S. university with open admissions.

Subjects received a two-part questionnaire entitled "Impressions of International Peoples," which read: "We are studying the impressions people have about the inhabitants of different countries. You are to evaluate some characteristics of people from the United States first in regard to the media image and next in regard to real people you have known."

Subjects then rated their perceived "images of the U.S. and its people presented in the movies and television produced in that country" on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) for each of nineteen attributes. These attributes had been generated through intuitive reflection on media stereotyping and previous pilot testing. Subjects were also given the option of circling "Don't Know" if they "don't know or cannot determine" enough to make a rating. The complete text of each scale appears later in the chapter in Table 1.2. Finally, participants rated their "impressions of actual people from the United States" (i.e., autostereotypes) on each of the same nineteen attributes with the same 7-point scales.

Study 2 Method: International Samples

The second study gathered data on impressions of American people from samples of university students living in eleven different countries: France (Aix-en-Provence), Germany (Freiburg), Denmark (Aarhus), Switzerland (Basel, Neuchatel, and Zurich), Morocco (Fes), Argentina (Buenos Aires), Brazil (Sao Paulo), Canada (Calgary), Hong Kong, Austria (Klagenfurt), and Nigeria (Ile-Ife).

Thanks are expressed to colleagues Mark Helle, Brigitt Pitzinger, Abdellali Bentahila, Cheryl French-Mestre, François Grosjean, Kirsten Nielsen, Orlando J. D'Adamo, Virginia Garcia Beaudoux, Gustav Habermann, Monica

Lasisi, Rumjahn Hoosain, Adail Victorino Castilho, Carlos Eduardo Amadori, and Michael Klassen for international data collection and to Mark Helle, Brigitt Pitzinger, Ana Braga-Henebry, Cheryl Frenck-Mestre, Elizabeth Nelson, Andrew Johnson, and Sonya Guerra for translations of the questionnaire.

Unlike in the first study, participants were given just one set of nineteen scales to rate "your opinion about people from the United States." No mention was made of the media image as distinct from "real people." At the end of the nineteen scales were listed ten possible sources of their impressions just given. Subjects were asked "From which sources below have you received information that you used to make the above evaluations?" They were asked to rank order the sources in importance, leaving blank those that "are of no importance in forming your impressions." The ten sources were television, movies, books, radio, magazines, newspapers, friends from the U.S., travelling in the U.S., living in the U.S., and the U.S. government. Finally, some general demographic information was collected, including where they had lived or travelled outside their home country. As appropriate, the questionnaire was translated into Spanish, German, Portuguese, or French by native speakers and checked by a second speaker.

Results

Demographics

Major demographic data from each of the foreign samples and from the pooled international sample appear in Table 1.1. Pooled data are presented with and without the Canadian sample. This sample was much larger than any of the other samples and, unlike any other national sample, more than ninety percent had visited the United States. A close examination of those few who had not been to the U.S. found many recent international migrants to Canada.

Overall, the pooled international sample was not quite two-thirds female, with a large majority in their early twenties. About two-thirds had travelled outside their home countries, but only about one-sixth of the non-Canadians had visited the U.S. This left an aggregate sample of 520 who had never been to the U.S.

Attribute Ratings

Table 1.2 presents the mean media image and autostereotype ratings for each of the nineteen attributes from the U.S. sample, along with the same mean ratings of the pooled foreign sample, minus the Canadians (International Stereotype). In addition, the percentages of the international sample responding "Don't know" to each attribute is shown.

Table 1.1. Demographic Characteristics of International Samples

<i>Country</i>	<i>Total Number</i>	<i>Gender Male/Female</i>	<i>Mean Age</i>	<i>Living Abroad Yes/No</i>	<i>Living in U.S. Yes/No</i>	<i>Travel Abroad Yes/No</i>	<i>Travel in U.S. Yes/No</i>
Argentina	61	9/48	23.6	9/50	0/58	35/24	9/49
Brazil	65	19/46	22.7	9/56	1/64	34/31	13/52
Germany	58	32/26	24.7	28/30	6/52	58/0	16/42
Austria	10	4/6	24.3	8/2	2/8	10/0	4/6
Denmark	59	15/44	26.1	34/25	7/52	56/2	13/45
France	64	14/49	27.8	12/52	2/62	58/6	7/57
Switzerland	110	46/62	24.0	45/64	11/98	107/1	33/75
Hong Kong	63	15/48	19.4	3/63	1/62	39/24	4/59
Morocco	63	24/39	24.4	6/57	0/63	32/31	0/63
Nigeria	81	54/28	23.4	12/63	1/73	19/56	1/72
Canada	230	91/139	19.5	67/163	18/212	223/7	200/30
Total (excl. Canada)	634	247/442	23.9	166/459	31/592	448/175	100/520
Total	864	323/535	23.7	233/622	49/804	67/182	301/549

Nineteen one-way within-subjects analyses of variance were performed on the U.S. students' ratings of the media image and their autostereotypes of real U.S. people. Next, nineteen between-subjects analyses compared that media image with the pooled international stereotype. A final set of between-subjects analyses compared the autostereotype ratings with the pooled international stereotype. Pairs that differed significantly are so indicated in Table 1.2. The highly conservative alpha level of $p = .005$ was chosen due to the large number of univariate analyses and the resulting increased probability of alpha error.

Differences between the U.S. subjects' ratings of the media image and the autostereotype appeared on eight of the nineteen attributes. The media image of U.S. people was seen as more emotionally expressive, physically attractive, violent, sexually promiscuous, and having more free time than the autostereotype. On the other hand, the autostereotype, as compared to the media image, was seen as more prejudiced, more religious, and more prone to worrying about having enough money.

The media typed by the U.S. subjects did not differ significantly from the pooled international stereotype on five of the nineteen scales. Stereotypes were close to the rated media image in how fun-loving, selfish, and hard-working U.S. people are, and in the degree to which they worry about having enough money and in how well men treat women. Compared to the U.S.-

Table 1.2. Mean Attribute Ratings (1 = Disagree, 7 = Agree) U.S. and Pooled International Samples

	U.S. Ratings		Mean	% Don't Know
	Media Image Mean	Autostereotype Mean		
They are patriotic	5.47	5.35a	5.99b	5.5
They are fun-loving	5.55a	5.40a	5.49a	7.4
They are selfish	4.93ab	5.17b	4.79a	13.4
They are prejudiced	4.60a	5.07b	5.05b	10.7
They are emotionally expressive	5.53a	4.94b	4.69b	10.3
They are physically attractive	6.17a	4.80b	3.97c	6.3
They are friendly	5.26a	5.05ab	4.81b	6.6
They are politically conservative	4.31a	4.27a	5.03b	12.9
They like children a lot	5.05a	5.02a	4.28b	19.9
They worry about having enough money	5.39a	6.48b	5.33a	10.4
They are religious	3.85a	4.65b	4.50b	9.0
They have close families	4.63a	4.45a	3.44b	13.2
The men treat women well	4.32a	4.30a	4.21a	19.6
They are greedy and materialistic	5.29a	5.36a	4.94b	9.1
They have lots of free time	5.20a	3.41b	3.82c	15.9
They are intelligent	5.41a	5.07a	4.22b	10.9
They are violent	5.19a	4.49b	4.45b	9.1
They are hard-working	4.96ab	5.24b	4.77a	8.5
They are sexually promiscuous	5.94a	5.17b	4.50c	19.9

Note: Means with different letters differ from each other $p < 005$.

identified media image, international respondents rated U.S. people as being more patriotic, more prejudiced, more politically conservative, and more religious; they also rated them less friendly, less emotionally expressive, less greedy and materialistic, less intelligent, less violent, less sexually promiscuous, and much less physically attractive. In addition, the international stereotype found U.S. people as liking children less, having families that are less close, and having less free time than the media image.

Similarly, the U.S. autostereotype did not differ from the international stereotype on seven of the nineteen scales. In this sense the pooled international sample held similar impressions to the U.S. people on the scales of fun-loving, prejudiced, emotionally expressive, friendly, religious, violent, and in how well women are treated. However, the international stereotype saw U.S. people as being more patriotic, less selfish, less attractive, more politically conservative, less greedy and materialistic, less intelligent, less hardworking, and less sexually promiscuous than did the U.S. autostereotype. The international stereotype also found them to like children less, be less worried about having enough money, have less close families, and more free time.

The mean international stereotype ratings for the different national samples (with the exception of Austria, where $N = 10$) appear in Table 1.3. Although there was at least one pair of statistically significant differences in the means for each attribute, overall the similarity across national samples is more striking. Certain deviations are considered below in the discussion.

Finally, in order to examine dimensions underlying the nineteen attributes, a factor analysis extracted three reliable factors (via principal axis factoring with an eigen value cutoff of 1.0). The three factors had eigen values ranging from 2.06 to 1.08 and together accounted for 26.10 percent of the explained variance. Only items with factor loadings greater than .40 were included in the three factors. The first factor (antisocial) included violent, selfish, and greedy and materialistic. The second factor (extroverted/hedonistic) included emotionally expressive, fun-loving, and physically attractive. The third factor (prosocial) contained liking children, and whether men treat women well.

Formative Influences

Unless otherwise specified, all internationals who indicated they had ever been to the United States were eliminated from the analysis of the formative influences. The percentages rating each influence as important appear in Table 1.4, along with their mean rating of importance.

The primary perceived influence in the formation of stereotypes about the U.S. was television, both in terms of the highest percentage rating it "important" and in terms of the mean ranking of those who rated it important. In

Table 1.3. Mean Stereotypes for Different International Samples (1=Disagree, 7=Agree)

	National Sample										Mean*
	France	Germany	Denmark	Switzerland	Morocco	Argentina	Brazil	Nigeria	Hong Kong	Canada	
Patriotic	6.02	6.21	6.52	6.30	5.46	6.34	6.44	4.75	5.14	6.43	5.99
Fun-Loving	5.36	4.95	5.26	5.16	4.96	5.82	5.88	5.54	6.07	4.55	5.49
Selfish	4.92	4.62	5.64	4.86	4.72	5.77	<u>5.88</u>	3.91	<u>3.44</u>	4.85	4.79
Prejudiced	5.75	4.56	5.30	5.35	<u>4.00</u>	5.41	<u>6.38</u>	4.30	4.14	4.97	5.05
Emotionally expressive	4.75	4.18	4.53	4.67	4.98	4.55	3.70	4.80	<u>5.74</u>	4.48	4.69
Physically attractive	3.54	3.05	3.50	3.53	4.63	4.11	4.02	4.96	4.39	4.12	3.97
Friendly	4.54	4.76	4.87	5.03	5.07	3.71	<u>3.39</u>	4.89	5.53	4.23	4.81
Politically conservative	5.75	5.54	<u>6.11</u>	5.58	<u>3.70</u>	5.84	5.81	4.43	<u>2.92</u>	<u>3.58</u>	5.03
Like children	4.85	4.18	3.92	4.70	3.82	4.10	4.15	4.10	4.04	3.47	4.28
Worry over money	6.00	4.75	5.86	5.15	5.19	<u>6.77</u>	6.12	4.49	<u>3.42</u>	5.63	5.33
Religious	<u>5.63</u>	4.89	5.40	4.81	<u>3.13</u>	4.09	4.44	3.66	4.29	<u>3.46</u>	4.50
Close families	3.81	4.12	3.77	3.84	2.66	2.62	3.34	3.27	3.21	3.31	3.45
Treat women well	3.89	3.93	3.47	4.18	5.12	3.50	3.51	4.72	4.37	3.56	4.21
Greedy	5.72	4.79	5.43	5.27	5.46	5.24	5.28	<u>3.65</u>	4.14	5.07	4.94
Have free time	3.95	4.14	3.55	4.30	<u>2.28</u>	3.26	4.00	3.78	5.13	3.36	3.82
Intelligent	3.88	3.52	3.66	3.78	5.15	4.76	3.79	5.11	3.96	3.95	4.22
Violent	4.34	4.33	4.36	4.51	3.95	5.22	5.14	4.25	4.48	4.85	4.45
Hard-working	4.36	4.39	4.95	4.59	5.56	5.36	5.22	5.17	<u>3.10</u>	4.26	4.77
Sexually promiscuous	3.63	4.32	4.00	3.96	5.25	4.93	4.06	5.27	4.93	4.06	4.50

*Includes all international samples except Canada.

Note: Underline indicates distance greater than +1 or -1 from overall mean.

Table 1.4. Percent Sample Never in U.S. Rating Influence Important

	<i>Argentina</i>	<i>Morocco</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Switzerland</i>	<i>Hong Kong</i>	<i>Nigeria</i>	<i>Austria</i>	<i>Brazil</i>	<i>Mean All</i>	<i>Rating</i>	<i>Canada</i>
Television	76	92	81	98	86	82	95	68	83	98	86	1.91	88
Film	69	81	64	89	79	82	93	60	50	98	79	2.47	65
Books	47	86	62	67	60	55	73	74	67	65	66	3.27	40
Radio	41	54	50	62	56	48	47	61	33	37	51	3.73	44
Magazines	43	76	69	53	68	48	81	64	50	85	65	3.19	63
Newspapers	63	68	74	78	70	78	86	68	0	79	73	2.74	70
U.S. friends	45	54	60	60	44	47	54	42	33	29	48	3.07	45
Travel in U.S.	6	3	12	4	16	8	8	18	0	0	9	3.70	75
Living in U.S.	2	20	2	0	9	5	7	17	0	0	5	4.75	9
U.S. government	33	27	24	20	33	34	36	17	0	46	30	3.90	36
<i>N</i>	49	63	42	45	57	75	59	72	6	52	520		230

Note: Canadian data include all participants, whether or not they had lived or visited the U.S.

all eleven samples, television was rated more important than any other influence, except for two countries where TV was tied for first. The second most important influence on both dependent measures was film, and the third was newspapers. Clearly, participants perceived that the media play a powerful role in forming their stereotypes of the U.S.

Discussion

National Images

Several conclusions may be drawn from these data. First of all, it is not the case that the international perceived image of people from the United States more closely fits either the media image or the autostereotype ratings in a general sense. The scale with the clearest suggestion of the media cultivating foreign impressions of the U.S. was the "worrying about having enough money" scale, where the autostereotype differed from both the media image and the foreign stereotype, which did not differ from each other. U.S. people saw themselves as worrying a lot more about having enough money than people elsewhere saw them or than they themselves perceived the media to portray. However, this was the only scale clearly to show this predicted pattern.

On the other hand, the most common pattern (six scales) occurred in which the international stereotype did not differ from the U.S. autostereotype, although both differed from the rated media image, on the scales of prejudice, emotional expressiveness, liking children, religion, greed, and violence. Influences other than the media must be the formative factors in these cases.

Another pattern (three scales) occurred in which the media image, autostereotype, and international stereotype all differed from each other (physical attractiveness, sexual promiscuity, and having lots of free time). Apparently, attributions on these factors are formed on the basis of factors not tapped in this study.

On the selfish and hard-working scales, only the U.S. autostereotype and the aggregate international stereotype differed from each other, with the U.S.-perceived media image intermediate and not significantly different from either. On the friendly scale, only the U.S.-perceived media image and the international stereotype differed.

A few extreme ratings are worthy of comment. The highest ratings on the perceived media image were physically attractive (6.17), sexually promiscuous (5.94), and fun-loving (5.55), whereas the lowest rating was religious (3.85); these clearly reflect the often-noted hedonistic characteristics of the media entertainment personality. On the other hand, the highest rating for the autostereotype was "worry about having enough money" (6.48) and the lowest was "have lots of free time" (3.41). This is a very different reality than what is reflected by the media image, although these two ratings may have

been somewhat more extreme due to the fact that all participants were college students, who are traditionally very busy people on limited budgets.

Although the cross-national similarities in stereotypes presented in Table 1.3 are more striking than their differences, some of the latter are worth noting. For purposes of this discussion, only mean ratings that fell outside of the range of -1 to $+1$ around the pooled Likert-scale means are considered. These means are underlined in Table 1.3. First of all, it is noteworthy that only twenty-one out of 190 means (eleven percent) were outside this range, a small number considering the cultural differences in the samples. About half of these occurred in the samples from Hong Kong (six) and Morocco (four). In considering these deviations, we must keep in mind the overall Western European bias of the pooled international stereotype (four out of ten national samples). Four of the deviations (nineteen percent) appeared on the "politically conservative" scale and were probably due to the different meaning of that term in national political cultures.

Other deviations would appear to reflect at least the popular stereotypes held by their raters. For example, economically booming Hong Kong rated U.S. people far less hard-working than did any other sample; these respondents also thought U.S. people had a lot of free time. Racially mixed and tolerant Brazil found U.S. people very prejudiced, while Islamic Arab Morocco found them much less so. Heavily Chinese Hong Kong found U.S. people more emotionally expressive than any other group did. Islamic Morocco found U.S. people the least religious of any of the samples.

Media Influences and Cultivation

Although the present study clearly did not test cause-and-effect relationships, the retrospective rankings of the various media sources, especially television and film, as highly important cannot be dismissed. All of the most important influences identified, as reported in Table 1.4, are media sources. As the examination of the attribute ratings suggests, it is likely that the actual media influence is considerably stronger in forming national impressions in regard to some attributes than others. Future research should work to identify attributes that are particularly vulnerable and those that are particularly resistant to media influence.

Conclusions and Future Research

The present research provides some suggestive evidence as to a formative role of media, especially television, in the cultivation of national impressions of people who have never visited a country. However, much remains to be done to determine which types of knowledge are disproportionately influenced by media. Samples from ten nations showed a striking degree of similarity in both their

aggregate stereotype and their ratings of influencing factors. Because all samples were university students, there might, of course, be greater differences in representative samples of the various populations. On the other hand, university students have greater access than most people in many societies to influences other than media. It is entirely possible that national impressions may actually be more media-influenced in less-educated populations. Also, future research should include any additional formative influences not considered in this study. One potentially important factor suggested to the authors so far is school experience.

This study of course has the common cross-cultural research limitations of non-random samples and some degree of a Western European bias, although the non-European samples were more striking in their similarity than in their differences from the European samples. Also, it is of course a "cross-national" rather than truly a "cross-cultural" study, with some of the nations very culturally homogeneous (Denmark, France, Morocco), and others very heterogeneous (Brazil, Canada, Nigeria). Future research should assess more non-Western societies and examine impressions about other major communications-exporting nations (e.g., Mexico, Brazil, France, United Kingdom) as well as the U.S.

Finally, the limits of cross-national research using trait rating scales must be considered. Individualist societies, such as Western nations, where trait theories and other personality scales and theories were developed, generally see the self as an independent self-system, whereas collectivist societies use an interdependent self-system, defined in terms of one's relationships to others (Markus and Kitayama 1991). How such a difference might be reflected in ratings such as those gathered in the present study is not entirely clear, but the issue is worthy of considering.

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