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The Cultivation of Idealistic Moral Expectations: The Role of Television Exposure and Narrative Engageability

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The aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of how fictional television shapes people's expectations about the moral workings of the real world, relying on cultivation theory and models of narrative and moral effects as theoretical frameworks. Using a cross-sectional sample of the general German adult population, this study investigated the relationship between television viewing time (overall television and three genres—crime drama, medical drama, sitcoms) and narrative engageability with three idealistic moral expectations (just world beliefs, professional altruism of doctors, tolerance of otherness). Although genre viewing was not related to idealistic moral expectations,

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overall television viewing and narrative engageability proved to have consistent positive relationships. Results indicate that television viewing, the audience's eagerness to engage with narratives (narrative engageability), and moral expectations about the real world are intertwined and mutually dependent.

In some regards, the television world is not an attractive place to live: One should expect to be assaulted, be threatened, be deceived, be lied to, hear heavy swearing, or be hurt (e.g., Bilandzic, Hastall, & Sukalla, 2017; Potter & Ware, 1987). However, the message that a viewer takes away from television depends on the context. Although there are lies in television, "truth always wins out"; although there is crime, "good wins over evil" (Potter, 1990). This corresponds to the distinction that Potter and Smith (1999) made between different narrative levels: A single norm violation may go unpunished at first but be punished at the end. Such moral messages at the macro level seem to carry considerable weight for cultivation processes. Several researchers have concluded that television messages are functional (in the sense that they confirm moral standards and stabilize society) rather than dysfunctional (Grabe, 2002; Sutherland & Siniawsky, 1982) and that positive moral themes can be identified, such as the importance of family and safety (Daalmans, Hijmans, & Wester, 2014).

This study addresses such positive, functional moral messages and investigates how fictional television series cultivate idealistic moral expectations. We define idealistic moral expectations as a person's belief that the world, essentially, functions in a morally acceptable way. We assume that these idealistic moral expectations are, to some extent, shaped by the unique messages television stories provide about morally laden situations and characters and that there are specific moral patterns visible in genres of television series.

Based on a theoretical framework of cultivation theory, models of narrative effects and moral beliefs, we conducted a cross-sectional population survey to investigate the relationships of genre and overall television viewing with three instances of idealistic moral expectations: the just world belief (corresponding to crime drama), doctors' professional altruism (medical drama), and tolerance of otherness (sitcoms). We assumed that the intensity with which viewers are usually and frequently engaged in television narratives strengthens idealistic moral expectations. Thus, we also included the personality trait of narrative engageability (Bilandzic, Sukalla, Schnell, Hastall, & Busselle, 2019) in our study to assess the force of narrative in the cultivation process.

Idealistic Moral Expectations Embedded in Three Popular Genres

Television, as the "primary storyteller" (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009, p. 41) of our time, puts forward a multitude of social worlds, which all show, tell,

and imply moral views on actions and characters. Television displays diverse arrangements of values and norms, both enforced and violated. Below the surface of typical plots and characters we can identify underlying moral messages that distinctly code certain actions as morally right or wrong (Bilandzic et al., 2017; Daalmans et al., 2014; Daalmans, Hijmans, & Wester, 2017; Krijnen & Meijer, 2005). Television portrayals of morality have a number of effects on viewers, for example, on moral and ethical reflection (Krijnen & Verboord, 2016; Scarborough & McCoy, 2016), moral reasoning (Bilandzic et al., 2017; Krcmar & Cingel, 2016), moral rumination (Eden, Daalmans, Van Ommen, & Weljers, 2017), or the salience of moral intuitions (Eden et al., 2014).

The original hypothesis of cultivation did not include a separation of the symbolic world of television into types of program or genre (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015). Nonetheless, in the course of time, researchers started to look at more narrow conceptions of television use and have found that genre exposure matters for a number of cultivation domains (e.g., Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Potter & Chang, 1990), although the explanatory power of genre varies across studies and measures (Bilandzic & Rössler, 2004). Genre exposure may be particularly relevant for more complex television messages, including moral messages, which cannot be measured in the surface text of television.

Whereas cultivation research has not been typically concerned with moral issues, one early concept—the "mean world syndrome"—has strong ties to moral issues. The mean world view is the belief "that you can't be too careful in dealing with people" (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980, p. 18). The mean world belief describes a generalized expectancy that norms (e.g., fairness, cooperation, and care) will be violated on a regular basis. Few cultivation studies investigate *positive* moral messages of television; examples are the just world belief used by Appel (2008), general values such as "good wins over evil," or "honesty is the best policy" (Potter, 1990) and materialism (Shrum, Burroughs, & Rindfleisch, 2005).

Idealistic moral expectations can be regarded as instances of such positive worldviews. We conceptualize idealistic moral expectations as a set of norms, which condense into a generalized expectation that the world is composed in a morally acceptable way and that morally just outcomes may be expected of social situations. As cultivation does not provide a theoretical framework to explain how these expectations may be derived from repeated exposures to television, we use a model of moral beliefs by Popper (2010), which details the relations between moral judgments, virtues, and norms. The model starts with a person observing morally laden acts and events. Without conscious reflection, the person has instantaneous positive or negative emotional reactions to the observed acts and events ("like" or "dislike" intuitions in the tradition of moral intuitionist approaches, e.g., by Haidt & Joseph, 2008, or Hauser, 2006). Based

on these, deliberation may (but does not need to) follow in the form of conscious moral judgments, which may weaken or strengthen the original intuitions. The final steps in this process are the formation of socially constructed virtues as standards for judging people, as well as social and moral norms as standards for judging and selecting actions, which ultimately result in a broader ethical system (Popper, 2010). A virtue, in a basic definition, can be conceived of as an "excellent trait of character" (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2016). Norms specify what is desirable and what ought to be done (injunctive norms) and, on the other hand, show what most people do and what is typical or normal (descriptive norms; Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991).

The process described in Popper's (2010) model of moral beliefs fits quite well for television stories and the role of repeated exposures in the formation of moral norms. Television stories expand one's options to observe morally laden acts and events, even more so considering that narratives contain more conflicts and moral issues in a limited period compared to real life. Thus, Step 1 of Popper's (2010) model may be supplemented with television stories as a possible source for observing moral acts and events.

Second, stories also support the second step in the model—emotions and the corresponding moral intuitions. Stories, through their plot structure and by providing information about characters' inner states, drive specific emotional reactions in the viewer (Tan, 2008). These emotions are partly moral, for example, as affective dispositions toward characters (Raney, 2004), evoke spontaneous reactions of moral agreement or disagreement to actions and trigger the salience of moral values (Tamborini, 2013). We assume that in the course of repeated exposures to similar patterns of plots (and thus moral implications) moral judgments are formed toward specific (types of) acts and (types of) agents. Further, we assume that viewing in an engaged or transported mode (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Green & Brock, 2000) supports this process by allowing emotional responses and moral intuitions (for a more detailed account, see the Narrative Engageability as a Factor in Cultivation section). Finally, when these moral judgments solidify into perceptions of virtues and norms, viewers generalize from the television world to the real world—partly because moral rules carry universal truths that are applicable to both fictional and actual worlds.

We are interested in investigating the final product of this process, a system of norms that is shaped by the television world, which can be found in the more complex construct of "broader ethical systems" in Popper's model. We assume that genres repeat schematic plots and archetypal characters and display similar portrayals of moral virtues, values, and norms. Thus, the result of genre viewing is a "broader ethical system" composed of expectations not only toward the actions of persons but also toward general outcomes of social situations.

To investigate cultivation relationships of genre viewing with idealistic moral expectations, we first identified the most popular genres in German television, which turned out to be crime drama, medical drama, and sitcoms (Statista, 2017). The next task was to derive the moral messages contained in these genres. We did so by scrutinizing literature on genre patterns and their implications for moral sense making.

Crime Drama. Traditionally, crime drama puts forward a justice sequence in which a crime destabilizes societal order and creates injustice. Stability is restored in the course of the narrative as perpetrators are identified and punished, mostly by mandated characters in law enforcement (Cavender & Jurik, 2014; Turnbull, 2014). All efforts and sacrifices by law enforcement officers are driven by this desire for justice. This is emphasized by instances in which justice is not served and law enforcement officers engage in vigilantism. In this case, law and justice diverge—for example, when criminals escape punishment due to technicalities or lack of evidence and law enforcement officers catch and punish the criminals without trial or conviction (e.g., the protagonist of the crime series *Dexter*; see Donnelly, 2012). The logic of justice proposed by a vigilante law enforcer is hard to resist (Granelli & Zenor, 2016), even for (budding) professionals (van Ommen et al., 2017). Although crime drama also shows failures of justice and moral ambiguity in the protagonists (Lane, 2001), the plot is still driven by the wish to restore justice. Thus, we assume that this type of content pattern creates the belief in viewers that, ultimately, there is justice for every wrong (just world belief). There is evidence that viewers pick up on this desire for justice: Appel (2008) found that the belief in a just world increases with the amount of fictional television watched. In our study, we specifically investigate the role of exposure to crime drama as a more specific indicator; we set up the following hypothesis:

H1a: Exposure to crime drama is positively related to the just world belief.

Sitcom. For sitcoms, we build on their main theme: interactions of people and relationships. We suggest that a basic subtext of sitcoms is to call for the tolerance of otherness, that is, to respect and appreciate people despite (or because of) their little quirks.

Sitcoms revolve around the relationships of the protagonists and their interactions with each other in settings such as family, friends, or the workplace (Feuer, 2001). The genre walks a thin line between adaptive and maladaptive implications about person perceptions. Often, sitcoms draw comic power from stereotyping (Esposito, 2009; Valdeon, 2010) and creating “otherness” (Jontes,

2010). They use several humor techniques based on identity, displaying, and unveiling "idiosyncratic behaviors, which are surprising and outside the norm" (Juckel, Bellman, & Varan, 2016, p. 599). Modern sitcoms such as *How I Met Your Mother* or *The Big Bang Theory* exploit these techniques heavily—to an extent that practically all characters have strange quirks, be it rigid behavior, self-deprecation, condescension (see the full list in Juckel et al., 2016) or neuroticisms, tics, or simply odd world views. Often, well-liked, sympathetic protagonists display such behaviors, which are then coded as a likable idiosyncrasy, belonging to a witty, original person of positively eccentric character.

Underlying these idiosyncrasies seems to be the desire for distinction and nonconformity; although they create humor by the deviation from the norm, they also reflect back on and challenge the norm. Thus, the latent moral message is that idiosyncrasies and character quirks make us who we are, human, original, and unique, resisting the force and appeal of being mainstream. We suggest that a moral message between the lines in sitcoms is the call for tolerance of otherness.

H1b: Exposure to sitcoms is positively related to tolerance of otherness.

Medical Drama. For a long time, the stereotype of medical drama was that of the doctor-hero saving lives with his or her expert knowledge (Turow, 1996). The doctor–patient relationship is the first priority (Strauman & Goodier, 2011). Although the heroic never quite left television hospitals, it has been accompanied by more flawed, fallible, and insecure traits (Chory-Assad & Tamborini, 2001; Quick, 2009). Strauman and Goodier (2011) argued that characters who completely fall out of the doctor-hero schema (professionals whose concern for the patient is limited by their own selfishness and arrogance) serve as "foils for the hero, who must struggle against both disease and bureaucracy to do what is medically and morally correct for the patient" (p. 33; see also Turow & Gans-Borkin, 2007). Even protagonists increasingly gain a flawed image. The prototypical instance of this is *House, M.D.*, whose protagonist is a hero in "his capacity to diagnose and cure difficult cases" but at the same time "contradicts the norm, however, as an exceptionally arrogant and often unlikable character who pops pills and irritates and alienates his colleagues, subordinates and patients" (Strauman & Goodier, 2011, p. 34). Still, "House remains a hero because of his capacity to get it 'right'" (Strauman & Goodier, 2011, p. 34). Doctors are portrayed to go through great lengths to help their patients, even against a hospital's rules and with their own careers at risk (Foss, 2014). Thus, we assume that the expectation that doctors prioritize patient welfare and act with professional altruism will be pronounced in heavy viewers of the genre:

H1c: Exposure to medical drama is positively related to the belief in doctors' professional altruism.

Genre exposure should be the most specific indicator for the three domains of idealistic moral expectations as they directly relate to the themes and resolutions portrayed in them. However, there is some indication that all three themes cut across genres, and even fictional and factual formats. We find support for the presence of the just world belief in overall television in two studies. Krijnen and Meijer (2005) analyzed moral themes in Dutch prime-time television. They identified several moral themes that can be connected to the just world belief: legitimate authority, legitimate violence, and fairness. All three themes were present in both fictional and factual programs. Similarly, Daalmans et al. (2014), again in an analysis of Dutch prime-time television, found that judicial morality (dealing with the rules and regulations of law and, by their reinforcement, the restoration of public order and justice) cuts across all formats of television—news/information, entertainment/reality, and fiction. In addition, one of the three moral meta-themes that permeate all formats of television can be summarized as "*safety, order and justice form the basis of a structured and well-functioning society*" (Daalmans et al., 2014, p. 194).

For tolerance of otherness, these two studies also provide support. Civility, friendship, family, and love are four of 12 moral themes found by Krijnen and Meijer (2005). Civility, family, and love are present in both fictional and factual programming. Similarly, Daalmans et al. (2014) found the moral theme that "kindness, solidarity and civility are the glue that holds society together" (p. 193) as most prevalent in entertainment/reality shows; in fiction, the moral theme "Friends form your chosen family" (p. 194) emerged as relevant. Both themes connect to tolerance of otherness.

Finally, doctors' professional altruism is related to moral themes such as heroism and the good life, present in fiction and nonfiction (Krijnen & Meijer, 2005) and the moral meta-theme "Health is wealth" (Daalmans et al., 2014, p. 194). Supporting the relevance of altruism, Smith et al. (2006) showed in an analysis of U.S. television that 73% of the programs showed at least one instance of altruism (helping or sharing). Thus, apart from a genre effect, we also expect to find a positive relationship of the three types of idealistic moral expectations with overall television viewing.

H2: Television exposure is positively related to the just world belief, the belief in doctor's professional altruism, and tolerance of otherness.

We derived the three idealistic moral expectations from basic plot and character patterns in genres. Their validity is corroborated by the fact that

they also connect to basic moral values as identified in moral foundations theory (Graham et al., 2013) and the model of intuitive morality and exemplification (Tamborini, 2013). These models propose the existence of an innate moral mind (consisting of numerous moral foundations) that is then shaped by cultural learning and primarily influenced by intuition. Recurring media representations may increase salience for specific moral domains (e.g., Eden et al., 2014). Each of the three idealistic moral expectations connects to one of the domains from moral foundations theory and the model of intuitive morality and exemplification: The just world belief is essentially an extension of the moral domain "fairness," which is concerned with procuring justice according to commonly accepted rules; professional altruism of doctors connects to the domain "harm/care," which describes the values of looking after others and protecting them; and societal tolerance of otherness is a special case of the domain "loyalty," which expresses backing up and supporting people from one's group.

Although the themes of the three idealistic moral expectations connect well to moral foundations theory, we do seek to investigate more complex units attuned to the genres rather than singular moral domains.

Narrative Engageability as a Factor in Cultivation

Narrative engagement, or transportation, has been discussed as a key factor in persuasion by stories (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; Green & Brock, 2002). It describes a reader's or viewer's intensive experience with a story, marked by unwavering attention to the story and disregard of the actual surroundings, the feeling of being inside the story as well as emotional processing (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Green & Brock, 2000). There is meta-analytic evidence that narrative engagement/transportation does indeed strengthen persuasive outcomes (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2012; van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014).

To explain the effects of narratives for acquiring idealistic moral expectations, we use the model of mental simulation through narratives by Mar and Oatley (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 2016). The model suggests that fiction has the ability to simulate social interactions in readers' and viewers' minds, allowing them to learn about these interactions, the social world, and its rules. This process is supported by an immersive reading or viewing experience, making the mental simulation of the story feel real and similar to direct personal experiences. Similarly, transportation theory argues that being transported makes a reader's narrative experience resemble actual experience (Green & Brock, 2000). The model of narrative comprehension and engagement by Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) also argues that readers or viewers,

when assuming a perspective within a story (and thus being engaged with a story), get the impression of a direct experience. In our framework of the model of moral beliefs by Popper (2010), we suggest that narrative engagement serves two functions: First, it is an enabler of positive and negative emotions toward specific moral acts and events, as being deeply immersed in a narrative also entails more intensive feelings of empathy and sympathy (Oatley, 2002), as well as monitoring moral relevance for the characters in a vicarious way (Raney, 2004). Viewers take the cognitive and emotional point of view of the characters, which allows them to experience moral emotions such as anger or shame and evaluate the rightness and wrongness of actions as intended by the television narrative. Second, being immersed in the story also makes the moral acts and events appear more real through processes of mental simulation (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 2016). Thus, we assume that being immersed when observing narrated moral acts and events facilitates the construction of norms, as well as reinforces the effects of repeated exposures.

For cultivation, narrative engagement/transportation is not readily usable as it represents a *state* elicited by a specific stimulus, whereas cultivation is a process that takes place over a large number of exposures and is measured in surveys. Thus, in a paradigm in which no experimental stimulus is present, researchers have worked with the corresponding personality trait *transportability* (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004; Mazzocco, Green, Sasota, & Jones, 2010) or *narrative engageability*, a multidimensional and shorter instrument (Bilandzic et al., 2017, 2019). Both describe the propensity to experience engagement when reading or viewing stories. Repeated exposures in high engagement mode should increase the effect of television narratives by reinforcing a belief or an attitude with each exposure by enabling more elaboration and less critical scrutiny (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008). In addition, following the model of mental simulation through narratives by Mar and Oatley (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 2016) we can also assume that each exposure is reinforced by intensive vicarious experiences that resemble direct experience. There is evidence that trait transportability indeed strengthens narrative effects, for example, on attitudes toward homosexuals and affirmative action (Mazzocco et al., 2010), recall of brand names (Brechman & Purvis, 2015), and recall of antismoking ads (Dunlop, Wakefield, & Kashima, 2008). In addition, trait narrative engageability is positively related to more sophisticated levels of moral reasoning (Schnell & Bilandzic, 2017) and is able to predict effects of stories on story-consistent beliefs (Bilandzic et al., 2019). In choosing between the two constructs of trait transportability (Dal Cin et al., 2004) and trait narrative engageability (Bilandzic et al., 2019), we opted for narrative engageability for two reasons: First, narrative engageability is

a construct with four theoretically justified dimensions, which directly connects to the simulation model our research is based on: Emotional engageability refers to one's tendency to emote with characters and the overall story, which also includes moral emotions and intuitions. Propensity for curiosity/suspense refers to one's tendency to be involved in narrative plots and entails caring about the characters' fates, thus also supporting moral emotions and intuitions. The propensity for feeling present in story worlds as well as the ease of accepting unrealism in stories facilitate a viewer's perception of the story as being close to real life. The four dimensions together represent important aspects of trait engagement and cover the phenomenon in a comprehensive way. Therefore, we use the construct as an overall trait with a set of underlying dimensions rather than breaking it up in subscales. Second, the corresponding scale of narrative engageability is considerably shorter with 12 items than the transportability scale with 20 items. We assume that there should be a direct effect of narrative engageability on the agreement to the three idealistic moral expectations:

H3: Narrative engageability is positively related to (a) the just world belief, (b) the belief in doctors' professional altruism, and (c) tolerance of otherness.

Although we do expect a direct effect of engageability, the impact should be higher when both exposure and engageability are high. The reason is that each exposure is more powerful when it is experienced in a highly engaged mode, which is supported by ample evidence that transportation increases narrative effects (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2012; van Laer et al., 2014). Empirical evidence that exposure and engageability interact in cultivation processes is scarce, however. Although Bilandzic and Busselle (2008) did not find a linear moderation effect of transportability on genre cultivation, they did find a nonlinear moderation, in which relationships of genre exposure with genre-consistent beliefs were positive only at a high level of transportability. We assume that narrative engageability and genre exposure interact positively in shaping idealistic moral expectations, thus resulting in high levels of idealistic moral expectations when both narrative engageability and genre exposure are high and in low levels when narrative engageability and genre exposure are low.

H4a: Narrative engageability and exposure to medical drama positively interact to predict the belief in doctors' professional altruism.
H4b: Narrative engageability and exposure to crime drama positively interact to predict the just world belief.
H4c: Narrative engageability and exposure to sitcoms positively interact to predict tolerance of otherness.

METHOD

Validation Pretest

A pretest was conducted to validate the pertinence and applicability of the genre exposure and cultivation measures.

Participants. The pretest used a cross-sectional sample of the general German population (different from the main study), with quotas based on gender, age, and education level (n = 291, age: M = 40.80, SD = 14.80; 49.1% female). The sample was accessed via a German commercial respondent panel. After the survey, participants were compensated with a small financial reward.

Exposure Measure for Television Genre. For the main study, we sought to employ a short, simple, easy-to-understand but valid measure of genre exposure. We designed a single-item question for each genre: "What types of series do you watch? Please indicate how often you watch the genres listed below" to be answered with a 7-point-Likert scale from 1 (*very rarely*) to 7 (*very often*) and an additional option to check 0 (*never*). Each genre was listed with four examples of series of the genre, which represent the most popular instances in German television (Statista, 2017). Most of the examples were U.S. productions rather than domestic ones, which simply reflects audience popularity. The idea of this particular procedure was that, most often, people would intuitively recognize the genre labels, just as they do in everyday life. This corresponds to an understanding of genre as a discursive practice: Viewers use the genre label to communicate about content (Todorov, 1990). To make sure that misunderstandings were eliminated or at least minimized, we added the four examples for each genre in the questionnaire. If respondents were not sure about a genre, they could deduce its meaning from the examples. The goal is that people should be able to classify at least one series in the correct genre and should make as few errors as possible. In the validation pretest, participants were shown 12 series titles and asked to match them with the correct genre. As Table 1 shows, of all respondents who were familiar with the show, between 74.6% and 92.3% classified the crime shows correctly, between 60.5% and 87% for medical drama, and 82.2% and 92.3% for sitcoms. Incorrect classifications were all below 6% for crime and sitcom, whereas they were higher for medical drama, up to 20.9%. Nonetheless, when we consider the percentage of respondents who correctly classified *at least one of the four shows* (provided that they are familiar with at least one show), the rates are considerably higher: 93.4% classify at least one crime show correctly, 95.8% at least one medical drama, and 95% at least one sitcom. Thus, we conclude that the measure is

TABLE 1
Validation Pretest of Genre Use Measure: Classification of Series in Genres

Show Genre and Title	*Valid* n *(Familiar With Show)*	*Correct Classification*	*Incorrect Classification*	*Unable to Classify*	*At Least One Show Correctly Classified*
Crime					93.4%
Law & Order	261	92.3%	1.5%	6.1%	valid $n = 274$ (familiar with at least one crime drama)
The Mentalist	250	81.6%	5.6%	12.8%	
Castle	209	74.6%	5.7%	19.6%	
True Detective	208	85.1%	3.8%	11.1%	
Medical Drama					95.8%
House, M.D.	278	80.6%	14.0%	5.4%	valid $n = 285$ (familiar with at least one medical drama)
Grey's Anatomy	261	87.0%	7.7%	5.4%	
Private Practice	172	60.5%	20.9%	18.6%	
Club der roten Bänder	217	74.2%	10.1%	15.7%	
Sitcom					95.0%
The Big Bang Theory	247	90.3%	2.4%	7.3%	valid $n = 260$ (familiar with at least one sitcom)
How I Met Your Mother	235	92.3%	1.3%	6.4%	
New Girl	187	84.0%	1.1%	15.0%	
Modern Family	185	82.2%	1.1%	16.8%	

Note. $N = 291$.

likely to discriminate between levels of genre viewing while making sure that the example-driven approach reduces fundamental misunderstandings.

Measures for Idealistic Moral Expectations. To measure idealistic moral expectations in the main study, we used Appel's (2008) scale of just world beliefs and developed a scale for societal tolerance of otherness and doctors' professional altruism, each of the three consisting of six items (full descriptions are upcoming). For the validation pretest, the items of the three scales were used to generate short descriptions of the idealistic moral expectation. For example, the description for just world belief was

> In general, the world is a just place, where people usually get what they deserve, where justice triumphs over injustice, where people are compensated if they suffer injustice, where injustice, no matter in which area of life (e.g., in the workplace, the family or in politics), is the exception rather than the norm, and where people try to be fair in their important decisions.

For each of these descriptions, respondents were asked to indicate how typical this is for crime drama series, medical drama, and comedy series, as well as television in general, on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all typical*) to 7 (*very typical*). As results in Table 2 show, overall, participants correctly associated an idealistic moral expectation with the relevant genre, that is, just world description rated highest for crime series, doctors' professional altruism rated highest for medical drama, and tolerance of otherness rated highest for sitcoms. Although doctors' professional altruism and tolerance of otherness show a clear distinction between the matching genre and the others, means for the just world description are quite high overall. Still, one-sample *t*-test analysis shows that the typicality assessment for crime series is significantly higher than for the other genres: medical drama, $t(290) = -3.35$, $p = .001$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [−0.44, −0.14]; comedy series, $t(290) = -9.67$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.27, −0.84];

TABLE 2
Validation Pretest: Typicality Assessments for Descriptions of Idealistic Moral Expectations

	Crime		*Medical Drama*		*Comedy*		*TV Overall*	
Idealistic Moral Expectations	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Just world belief	**4.43**	**1.83**	4.08**	1.77	3.37**	1.87	4.10**	1.44
Doctors' professional altruism	2.92**	1.81	**5.40**	**1.74**	2.97**	1.75	3.82**	1.59
Tolerance of otherness	3.70**	1.71	3.91**	1.73	**5.16**	**1.71**	4.21**	1.43

Note. $N = 291$. Correct genre is in bold. Range of all variables = 1–7.

**One-sample *t* tests show that the mean differs significantly from the mean of the correct genre ($p < .01$).

TV in general, $t(290) = -3.95$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.50, −0.17]. This indicates that the idea of injustice being punished is prevalent in all genres and television in general but is still considered most typical for crime drama series.

Overall, results from the validation study show that participants have a fairly clear idea of the genre a series belongs to. Also, the instruments for idealistic moral expectations can be considered appropriate and were used for the main study.

Main Study

Participants and Procedure. The main study was conducted with a cross-sectional sample of the general German population. Census data were used to define quotas for the sample, which was again accessed through a German commercial respondent panel. Participants received a small financial gratification. The main study (as well as the pretest study) was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Augsburg.

The sample ($n = 527$) turned out to be a good match for the quota plan; only small deviations are apparent. Thus, the sample structurally resembles the German adult population according to age, gender, and education.

After eliminating outliers, the final sample size stands at 520 participants (age: $M = 43.08$, $SD = 14.56$, range = 18–69 years, 50.2% female; education: 33.3% secondary school degree or lower, 32.1% middle school degree, 34.6% high school degree or higher).

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all items were measured on 7-point Likert-scales, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Genre Use. Participants were asked to indicate how often they watched series of the three genres (including on television, online streams, or DVDs) with the instrument described in the validation study (Likert scale: 0 [*never*], 1 [*very rarely*] to 7 [*very often*]; crime drama: $M = 3.08$, $SD = 2.56$; medical drama: $M = 2.14$, $SD = 2.23$; sitcom: $M = 2.68$, $SD = 2.51$).

TV Viewing Time. Participants indicated the average amount of time (in hours and minutes) they spent watching television on a general day in their lives. For analyses, answers were converted to total number of minutes ($M = 184.22$ minutes, $SD = 105.42$ minutes).

Narrative Engageability. To measure the trait of habitually getting engaged with narratives in films and series, we employed the Narrative

Engageability scale (Bilandzic et al., 2019). The 12-item scale covers four dimensions: propensity for narrative presence (e.g., "While watching a movie, the story world is often closer to me than the real world"), emotional engageability (e.g., "It is easy for me to get involved with the feelings of characters in movies"), curiosity/suspense (e.g., "I am often at the edge of my seat while watching a movie") and acceptance of unrealism (e.g., "I often find myself accepting events that I might otherwise have considered unrealistic"). Reliability of the scale was good ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.25$).

Just World Beliefs. We employed Appel's (2008) scale of just world beliefs. Reliability of the six-item scale was good ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.26$).

Tolerance of Otherness. We developed a set of six items that focus on the personal and societal tolerance of others with unique, "quirky" characteristics: "In our society it is regarded positively to be surrounded by different people, even if they seem somewhat peculiar at first"; "Usually people are accepted the way they are, despite their quirks"; "Overall, the originality of every single person is appreciated, even if their mannerisms may be somewhat exhausting"; "People usually are accepted, irrespective of whether their mannerisms sometimes rub someone the wrong way"; "In our society it is important to let people be the way they are, even if they are 'different' from yourself"; and "Overall, it doesn't bother people in our society if others think one of their friends is strange". Reliability was good ($\alpha = .85$, $M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.15$).

Doctors' Professional Altruism. An instrument was developed to measure doctors' professional altruism. The six items express whether doctors will do everything to help or cure patients, even including breaking professional rules or to their own detriment: "Usually doctors try to treat a patient to the best of their ability, even if he or she doesn't have insurance"; "In our society, patients' welfare is a doctor's highest priority, even if this means potential financial losses for them"; "Overall, doctors are always there for their patients, even if they have to neglect their private life"; "In our society, if someone is really ill, the welfare of the patient is always prioritized over the personal well-being of the doctor"; "Overall, doctors don't stubbornly stick to protocols, but think outside the box, if a patient's life depends on it"; and "Typically doctors pull out all the stops to help their patients, even if they have to break some rules to do this." Reliability was good ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.30$).

Finally, we also included first-order estimates for moral norm violations that are often displayed in the three genres but do not present the results in this analysis.

RESULTS

Results were computed using the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2013) for SPSS 24. All calculations were done in the form of moderations (model 1; Hayes, 2014). Separate analyses were run for each of the three genres (crime drama, medical drama, and sitcoms), with the corresponding idealistic moral beliefs (just world beliefs, doctors' professional altruism, and tolerance of otherness) as dependent variables, genre exposure as independent variable, and narrative engageability as moderator. We included overall television viewing time in each of the three regressions, as well as age, gender, and education level as controls. Correlations and descriptives of all variables are found in Table 3.

Genre Exposure and Idealistic Moral Expectations

First, we analyzed whether the consumption of the different genres of television series is related to idealistic moral expectations. Our first assumption was that heavy viewers of crime drama would show stronger just world beliefs. Contrary to our expectations, crime drama watching did not impact just world beliefs, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .48$, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.03]. Likewise, we expected the consumption of medical drama television to be related to participants' beliefs in doctors' professional altruism, which was not the case, $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .74$, 95% CI [−0.05, 0.06]. We also did not find a significant relationship of sitcom viewing with the tolerance of otherness, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .51$, 95% CI [−0.03, 0.06]. Overall, none of the three genres showed any significant relationship with their respective idealistic moral expectation, thus H1a to H1c are not supported (see Table 4).

Television Exposure and Idealistic Moral Expectations

Following that, we analyzed whether overall television exposure was positively related to participants' idealistic moral expectations. Television exposure showed a positive influence to just world beliefs (marginally), $b = 0.001$, $SE < 0.001$, $p = .05$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.002]; to beliefs about professional altruism, $b = 0.001$, $SE < 0.001$, $p = .01$, 95% CI [< 0.001, 0.003]; and tolerance of otherness, $b = 0.001$, $SE < 0.001$, $p = .01$, 95% CI [< 0.001, 0.002]. H2 is therefore supported, although the effects are small.

TABLE 3
Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables

Measure	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	M	SD
1. Exposure to overall television	—							184.22	105.42
2. Exposure to crime drama	.22**	—						3.08	2.56
3. Exposure to medical drama	.11**	.29**	—					2.14	2.23
4. Exposure to sitcom	.09**	.11*	.24**	—				2.68	2.51
5. Narrative engageability	.07	.14**	.31**	.20**	—			4.34	1.25
6. Just world belief	.08	.02	.11*	.09*	.20**	—		3.35	1.26
7. Professional altruism	.11*	.02	.05	.04	.16**	.53**	—	3.89	1.30
8. Tolerance of otherness	.11*	.05	.03	.03	.13**	.50**	.44**	4.13	1.15

Note. $N = 520$. Ranges of variables: exposure to television: in minutes, open-ended; exposure to crime, medical drama and sitcom: 0–7; narrative engageability, just world belief, professional altruism and tolerance of otherness: 1–7.*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

TABLE 4
Influence of Genre Viewing (Crime Drama, Medical Drama, Sitcoms) on Just World Beliefs, Beliefs About Doctors' Professional Altruism, and Societal Tolerance for Unusual Others

	Crime Drama/Just World Beliefs					*Medical Drama/Doctors' Professional Altruism*					*Sitcoms/Tolerance of Otherness*				
				95% CI					*95% CI*					*95% CI*	
Source	b (SE)	t	p	*LL*	*UL*	b (SE)	t	p	*LL*	*UL*	b (SE)	t	p	*LL*	*UL*
Constant	3.00 (0.29)	10.46	< .001	2.44	4.57	2.99 (0.029)	10.40	< .001	2.42	4.66	3.63 (0.27)	13.23	< .001	3.09	4.17
NE	0.21 (0.05)	4.09	< .001	0.11	0.31	0.19 (0.05)	3.66	< .001	0.09	0.29	0.15 (0.05)	3.19	.002	0.06	0.24
G	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.17	.48	−0.06	0.03	0.01 (0.03)	0.33	.74	−0.05	0.06	0.02 (0.02)	0.66	.51	−0.03	0.06
Interaction G × NE	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.65	.41	−0.06	0.03	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.039	.70	−0.06	0.04	0.05 (0.02)	3.04	.003	0.02	0.09
Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)	0.04 (0.011)	0.49	.69	−0.17	0.26	0.32 (0.11)	2.78	.01	0.09	0.54	0.06 (0.010)	0.53	.59	−0.15	0.26
Education	−0.06 (0.07)	−0.83	.41	−0.19	0.08	0.01 (0.07)	0.21	.84	−0.13	0.16	−0.07 (0.06)	−1.11	.27	−0.20	0.05
Age	0.01 (0.004)	1.33	.19	−0.002	0.01	0.01 (0.004)	2.70	.01	0.03	0.02	0.01 (0.004)	2.17	.03	< .001	0.02
Overall television Viewing time	0.001 (< 0.001)	1.97	.05	< .001	0.002	0.001 (< 0.001)	2.63	.01	< 0.001	0.003	0.001 (< 0.001)	2.52	.01	< .001	0.002

Note. Crime drama: $R = .24$, $R^2 = .06$, $F(7, 518) = 3.90$, $p < .001$; medical drama: $R = .25$, $R^2 = .06$, $F(7, 518) = 4.84$, $p < .001$; sitcoms: $R = .25$, $R^2 = .07$, $F(7, 518) = 5.22$, $p < .001$. CI = confidence interval; UL = upper limit; LL = lower limit; NE = narrative engageability; G = genre.

Narrative Engageability and Idealistic Moral Expectations

Next, we analyzed whether trait narrative engageability is related to idealistic moral expectations. This effect was consistent over all three genres. Narrative engageability shows a positive relation to just world beliefs, $b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.31]; doctors' professional altruism, $b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.29]; and tolerance of otherness, $b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.24]; see full results in Table 4. H3a to H3c were therefore supported.

Moderation Analysis (Narrative Engageability and Genre Exposure)

Finally, we investigated whether narrative engageability moderates the relationship between genre consumption and idealistic moral expectations. Here, results were inconsistent. Narrative engageability did not moderate the relationship between crime drama consumption and just world beliefs, $b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .69$, 95% CI [−0.17, 0.26], nor the relationship between medical drama consumption and doctors' professional altruism, $b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .70$, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.04]; see Table 4. A moderation effect was present for the relationship between the consumption of sitcoms and the tolerance of otherness, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.09]; see Table 4. The conditional effect was only significant at high levels of narrative engageability: NE_{low}, $b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.33$, $p = .12$, 95% CI [−0.12, 0.01]; NE_{med}, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .51$, 95% CI [−0.03, 0.06]; NE_{high}, $b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .01$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.15]. This means that a positive relationship between exposure to sitcoms and tolerance of otherness exists when narrative engageability is high. At medium or low levels of narrative engageability no such relationship emerges. Overall, only H4c was supported, whereas H4a and H4b were not.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we investigated the relationship of television genre consumption with genre-consistent idealistic moral expectations about the real world. Although genre consumption did not show relationships with any of the three idealistic moral expectations, narrative engageability positively correlated with all of them, showing that participants' propensity to immerse themselves into stories goes hand in hand with ideas on how the world functions in a moral sense. Moderation effects were inconsistent across the three analyzed genres and idealistic moral expectations: Narrative engageability did not change the relationships between crime drama exposure and just world beliefs, nor medical drama exposure and beliefs about doctors' professional altruism. However, for

participants with high narrative engageability, expectations about the societal tolerance of otherness increased with more sitcom consumption compared with those with low or medium narrative engageability. Thus, we could observe the hypothesized interaction between exposure and narrative engageability only for one out of three genres. In contrast, an increase in overall television viewing was associated with an increase in all three idealistic moral expectations.

The results inform the controversy of traditional versus genre-specific cultivation. We found that genre exposure is less important than overall television for idealistic moral expectations. This result seems to support the original argument made by Gerbner and his colleagues that it is not specific messages within a show or genre that affect people most but messages that permeate all programs and are thus impossible to miss for the regular viewer (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979). In our validation study, we did test whether each idealistic moral expectation was specific for one genre. Although we found that respondents found the right expectation to be most typical for the relevant genre, they also assigned some typicality to the other genres and overall television. Possibly, idealistic moral expectations are more universal principles of stories—the outcomes should be just, people in charge of the welfare of others should actually be concerned for others, and all people have flaws and should be respected nonetheless.

Then, narrative engageability is more important than both genre and overall television exposure. One reason may be, as just noted, that the idealistic moral expectations are universal principles of stories and more sensitive to one's general tendency to be engaged in stories than the exposure to one medium. Another reason may be that quality of exposure matters more than quantity. An occasional, but highly engaged, exposure to a television message may have a large effect on idealistic moral expectations without needing multiple exposures. This would be in line with narrative persuasion research that demonstrates a consistent effect of single immersive experiences (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2012; van Laer et al., 2014). A third interpretation concerns causality. As a cultivation study, our research is a cross-sectional survey and thus strictly correlational. Where narrative persuasion research assumes effects from a story to a viewer, we cannot make a bold conclusion about actual effects. On the contrary, the opposite direction makes at least as much sense: People holding idealistic moral expectations may be drawn to stories. Most likely, there is no single unidirectional influence at work but reciprocal causality. For cultivation processes, Bilandzic and Busselle (2008) described an entanglement of motivational and persuasion components, where viewers are drawn to choose television fare that they expect to be transportive, and then are influenced in their worldviews by actually being exposed. Similarly, Slater (2015) described in the dynamic reinforcing spirals model that people select identity-consistent media

content, which in turn confirms and reinforces existing attitudes. Although we do not have any indication of causal sequence in our study, there is nonetheless evidence that such an interlocked motivation-persuasion process is at work: All measures for genre exposure correlate with narrative engageability (crime = .14**, medical drama = .31**, sitcom = .20**; see Table 3). It seems that the tendency to immerse oneself in stories is a motivator to actually watch television stories. In any case, there is a correlational triangle in which narrative engageability is both positively related to idealistic moral expectations and genre use but the latter two are not.

For cultivation research, our study adds the domain of idealistic moral expectations to potential cultivation outcomes. Positive moral expectations have not yet been a strong focus of cultivation studies, although we know that television reiterates existing moral values, as demonstrated in studies by Krijnen and Meijer (2005) and Daalmans et al. (2014). These studies searched for patterns in overall TV, suggesting that moral pattern reside in a broader frame than only fictional series. Indeed, stories that make a point about morality can be found in any format—news, documentaries, or talk shows.

For narrative research, our study points to an interesting positive relationship between the tendency to be immersed in stories and moral beliefs—which is consistent with the long-suspected importance of stories in moral education and development (e.g., Hakemulder, 2000; Narvaez, 2002), with stories being as fundamental and engrained in human existence as morality itself (Haidt & Joseph, 2008).

For approaches to morality, our study points to not only the necessity of considering stories as a potential source but paying close attention to the way in which stories are processed. The model of moral beliefs by Popper (2010), which served as a basis for this study, highlights the importance of moral emotions and intuitions for the emergence of moral judgments and more abstract notion of virtue, norm, and ethical systems. In a narrative symbolic environment, emotions are guided by structures contained in the story itself. Stories enable emotional experience—even more often and more intense than in real life (Tan, 2008). The regularity with which one experiences such emotions is captured in the construct of narrative engageability. Also, narrative engageability indicates how much a person is used to perceiving stories from an inside perspective, which enables the simulation of social interaction and helps the viewer to perceive the simulation as close as personal experience (Oatley, 2016).

Limitations

The study has some limitations. First, the genre messages were derived from genre patterns identified in critical scholarship and empirical content analyses and validated in a separate study, making sure that the viewers' interpretation of the television

message is in accordance with the researchers' interpretation. Nonetheless, the lack of relationships with genre use calls for a reflection of the measures. Although first order estimates (frequency estimates and probabilities; Hawkins & Pingree, 1990) can be grounded in content analysis by simply counting occurrences, second order effects (beliefs about the social world; Hawkins & Pingree, 1990) are not accessible directly but need interpretation. Further disambiguating the moral message of television and/or genres should be a goal of future research.

Second, we already mentioned causality as a possible issue in relation to narrative engageability. However, causality is a chronic problem in cultivation research (Rossmann & Brosius, 2004). In our study, we cannot exclude that rather than seeing an effect of television viewing, we see reversed causality: Those that hold moral idealistic expectations are drawn to television and at the same time have a higher capacity for narrative engagement. The dilemma is not resolved by calling for experimental or longitudinal studies, as part of this ambiguity is deeply inscribed in the cultivation tradition, especially regarding Gerbner's frequent emphasis on cultivation being a process and not an effect (Morgan et al., 2009). Nonetheless, learning how discrete effects cumulate into larger, more stable ones would certainly also benefit cultivation theorizing and represent a worthwhile field of future research.

Third, we used self-report for television viewing. As a behavior, television viewing is always difficult to access in self-report, partly because people are less aware of some aspects of their behavior and partly because the cognitive arithmetic of estimating an average of consumption for a questionnaire is not an easy task. Alternatives to this method exist (Potter & Chang, 1990) but also have been criticized as too time-consuming (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997). Ultimately, the exposure measure will always be a compromise between respondent time and specificity, with new media environments being able to capture exposure in a more unobtrusive way (Morgan et al., 2015). Certainly, Riddle's (2012) measure of lifetime exposure would do justice to cultivation's basic tenet that television is present from an early age on.

Fourth, the narrative engageability scale covers the propensity to be engaged in televised stories; however, it is probable that someone who is engageable for television stories is also engageable for other stories—written, read, or told. Possibly, idealistic moral expectations, as generalizable and common views, were acquired through other stories. Thus, it would be promising to check for influences of stories from other media. Reading frequency may be used as an additional independent variable, although, again, it might not be frequent reading that is relevant but a general tendency with the occasional strong effect. In this context, it seems promising to use a measure like the author recognition test that asks respondents to identify authors from a list of names of authors and nonauthors (Fong, Mullin, & Mar, 2013, 2015).

CONCLUSION

In this study, we provided evidence that the way in which viewers interact with television stories matters for moral beliefs: Narrative engageability was positively related to participants' beliefs in a just world, the professional altruism of doctors, and the tolerance of society for the unusual behavior of others. Considering the dimensions of narrative engageability—ultimately comprising how people regularly immerse themselves into stories, how they get touched emotionally by them, and how they stimulate their curiosity and willingness to believe even unrealistic events—it is plausible that this rather positive, curious manner of approaching stories allows viewers to not only perceive the superficial content but also understand the underlying moral messages, which ultimately harnesses their ability to direct the audience's beliefs and expectations.

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