

Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, Setting the American Dream's Homeownerships Standard of Living and its Costs

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Abstract: This article discusses how the Extreme Makeover: HomeEditionUS television reality program, which focuses on rebuilding houses for those in need, sets unrealistic boundaries for the American Dream's standard of living of low-income homeowners in the United States. Passing through economic hardship in the past several years, it is important to study how this program can meet the real expectations of the deserved families and viewers in a way that it does not lead to more economic pressure for the selected family who is having their house reconstructed. Based on Gerbner's Cultivation theory, the media shapes the peoples' reality and view on the world around them and in this case, it shapes the expectations of an American dream home. This article analyzes how homeownership has become an American Dream and how the low-income families participating in Extreme Makeover: HomeEdition had struggled to become homeowners. It will do so by looking at five examples of families who have faced difficulty in maintaining the lavish homes that have been rebuilt for them by Extreme Makeover reality program team, with the use of a multidisciplinary frame and discourse analysis methodology. Hence it will describe how this program has set boundaries and raised expectations for the target families and viewers according to the Cultivation theory.

Key words: Extreme Makeover: HomeEdition, Reality show, American Dream, Homeownership, Low-income families

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Introduction

The American dream, the notion that every individual can find happiness and material prosperity in the United States, has long been the idea and ideal of many Americans residing within the country. This ideal evolved to a more perfect belief of how an American standard of living should be throughout time, adding concepts such as homeownership as a criterion as to who would be considered a happy, successful American, living the dream. Many TV programs have been made in line with the American Dream notion which had somehow helped to enhanced or redirected its meaning. Extreme Makeover: Home Edition is a reality program aired by ABC in which it plans to rebuild a house for a deserving American family who by default has said to be living in hope of the American dream. Obviously, the family has to own the house for the program producers to be able to rebuild it. But, many problems face this reconstruction decision, which are rooted in the homeownership policy in the United States and how it links with the programs missioned to rebuild the house. This raises questions as to how rational or ambitious the program's layout has been.

In order to elaborate more on this issue the article is divided into five sections. In the first section I will give a background on how homeownership has become an American dream and how the policies of the United States have led to low-income homeowners with reference to some scholarly texts and a survey. In the second section The Extreme Makeover: HomeEdition reality program plot will be introduced and give more details as to what it shows throughout the program. In the third section the American dream is portrayed in the Extreme Makeover: HomeEdition reality show will be discussed. The fourth section will discuss how the low-income deserving families chosen in the program struggle with the living standard or class portrayed within Extreme Makeover: HomeEdition's American Dream ideal. The fifth section will reflect on some cases which have confronted financial problems due to the luxurious level of the American Dream house provided for them without considering their living standards.

Theoretical Framework

Cultivation theory is a social theory which examines the long-term effects of television on viewers. "The primary scheme of cultivation theory states that the more time

people spend "living" in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality portrayed on television."(Cohen, J. &Weimann, G. 2000, p. 99) Cultivation leaves people with a misperception of what is true in our world.

Gerbner and Gross identify and track the 'cultivated' effects of television on viewers. They are "concerned with the effects of television programming (particularly violent programming) on the attitudes and behaviors of the American public." (Cited by Miller, 2005) They assert that the overall concern about the effects of television on audiences stemmed from the unprecedented centrality of television in American culture.

Cultivation theory in its most basic form, then, suggests that exposure to television, over time, subtly "cultivates" viewers' perceptions of reality. Gerbner and Gross say "television is a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviors. Its function is in a word, enculturation" and they believe in three entities—institutions, messages, and publics (Ibid, p.175).

Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, &Signorielli argue that while religion or education had previously been greater influences on social trends, now "television is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history...Television cultivates from infancy the very predispositions and preferences that used to be acquired from other primary sources ... The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of a common symbolic environment."(Cited by Bryant & D. Zillman, 2004)

Gerbner (1998) conceives mass communication specifically to be the transporter of messages. He asks: What are the dominant patterns of images, messages, and facts, values and lessons, expressed in media messages? "Based on message system analyses, cultivation researchers develop hypotheses about what people would think about various aspects of "reality" if everything they knew about some issue or phenomenon were derived from television's dominant portrayals." This message analysis was supposed to "investigates broad structures and consistent patterns in large bodies of those messages in the aggregate (as opposed to in any particular program or genre, and apart from issues of 'quality' or aesthetic value)".

Therefore, Gerbner's Cultivation theory suggests that the media shapes the viewers perspectives on the events, entities and beliefs that surround him/her. This means that a notion like the American Dream can evolve through time, depending

on the way it is presented by the media. The expectations which the media set in the minds of their viewers shape the boundaries of their beliefs. This article suggests that the reality show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, not only promotes the notion of homeownership within the American Dream, but sets up high criteria and boundaries as to what this home must look like.

American Dream, Homeownership and Low-Income Family Owners

The Founding Fathers, who were the framers of the United States Constitution, rooted in the American Dream idea within the United States Declaration of Independence, proclaiming that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights" including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Many early American colonists believed that with hard work any individual could succeed and attain the "American dream." The meaning of the American dream has changed during time, adding concepts such as Home Ownership within its categories.

In the initial version of the American dream, owning a home was not important but owning a land was significant. But the problem was that Native Americans did not believe in the ownership of natural resources such as land and this contradicted the Americans' view of land-worthiness (Jackson, 1985).

Following the Great Depression, homeownership became the main motto of US housing policy (Wright, 1983; Hayden, 1985; Jackson, 1985). This led most of the Americans to finance their American Dream by taking on mortgage debt.

Homeownership became the key issue within the American society after dealing with the interference in the mortgage market of the 1930's and the economic shock which followed it all the way through the Great Depression (Snowden, 2010).

But who were and are now the beneficiaries of this new homeownership policy? In the past, it mostly targeted the white collar workers and middle-class households, rather than the poor or skin-colored households (Denton, 2001), however, following the Clinton administration housing policies have changed. This means that homeownership policies include low-income families as well. Currently, the government runs advertisements promoting its policy on the homeownership of low-income families through local, state and federal levels (Shlay, 2006).

How did the low-income families enter the homeownership policy? It all started

in the 1930s when mortgages came to existence. And it all started with insurance companies, not banks. These daring insurance companies did this not in the interest of making money through fees and interest charges, but in the hopes of gaining ownership of properties if borrowers failed to keep up with the payments.

In fact, it was in 1934, in which the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) became the first modern mortgage agency that came into being. Planning to help save the country out of the Great Depression, the FHA introduced a new type of mortgage targeting those who couldn't get mortgages under the current programs. Back then, only four in 10 households owned homes. Today policies aiming the increase of homeownership amongst the poor have grown rapidly. Among such are different institutions such as Fannie Mae, Bank of America, the NAACP, and the non-profit Center for Community Self-Help. Some low-income families are in a situation where the value of their estate is declining to the extent that refurbishing their house is not beneficial for them in the sense that they will never gain back the money they invested into it. The low-income families face a degrading situation, finding themselves living in a deteriorated neighborhood along with the gradual damaging of their houses and the fall of their property's value (Miller Adams, 2002).

This is how the evolving American Dream to homeownership came into being in a way that today, most Americans believe homeownership to be the right of their American dream. The low-income homeownership policy has led to homeownership expectations to rise. In a national survey, 65 percent of the respondents cited the "dream" as a major reason to buy a home. (Fannie Mae 2003). The survey on Table 1, which was carried out by Harris Interactive on behalf of Trulia (Jan 20-24, 2011), tracked American attitudes towards homeownership since 2008. It indicates that 70 percent of Americans say homeownership is part of achieving their American Dream.

Table 1: Homeownership as Part of Personal American Dream

| | All Respondents | 18-34 Yr Olds | 35-44 Yr Olds | 45-54 Yr Olds | 55+ Yr Olds |
|-------------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| Yes | 70% | 65% | 66% | 74% | 76% |
| No | 21% | 24% | 23% | 18% | 20% |
| Don't Know | 8% | 11% | 11% | 8% | 4% |

Ever since the rise of the middle-class following the 1950's Great Moderation, corporations dealt with less labor unions and shifting political environments because of the decline in income gap. But the low minimum wage line has made the United States become the "second lowest level of intergenerational mobility among high-income countries and the second lowest wealth equality rate"(Cassel, 2007; Hertz, 2006).

Home Edition's Mission

In each episode of ABC's Extreme makeover: Home Edition's program, a deserving family's house which is selected by the producers of this reality program will be chosen for a total renovation. In fact, the house would be completely destructed and built all over again while the family is away for a vacation within a week time. The chosen family are usually less fortunate families who have faced certain hardships in their lives such as a victim of a natural disaster, a family member with a life-threatening illness, in need of new hope, veteran's family, families who have been victimized by a form of loss or tragic event, families who have either lost loved ones or had loved ones injured in car accidents, domestic violence, gang-related crimes and drug abuse and etc. Although it is said that the families qualifications must meet two criteria: first, they must be truly deserving and in need of the makeover, and second, they must be the kind of people who are a helping and giving hand to their community. But in comparison to each other, not all the families might exactly meet the two criterions.

The interior and exterior design of the new home, which is much bigger than the old one, it totally designed within the special needs of the family members. For example in one series the complete house had air purifiers to help for creating a healthy home environment in a family with 6-year-old girl who had just received a heart transplant.

Once the construction had been completed and the house had been filled with new furnishings that are, by comparison, far more luxurious than what was in the family's previous abode, the family returns. This is the peak of the program where everyone is overwhelmed by the magical change that has taken place in their house. The house has been rebuilt in the best ever possible way, quite close to the house of a millionaire. Here, it seems that the family had being saved by a hero

who had fulfilled their only dream, a relief to their hardships, which was to have a brand new house. The program creates an emotional situation in which charity, donations, help and the sympathy felt with the family brings tears to the viewers' eyes. In some cases the family is also given a brand new car, extra money for charity work or financial help, scholarship for their children and etc.

But the question remains, what happens after all this is over and the construction crew leaves the family with their new house? Have they solved the major problem of a family with all these spending and efforts that have took place? You will see some examples in section four which would help you out.

Home Edition and the American Dream

This reality show portrays the American Dream homeownership within the luxurious level it attains during the rebuilding of the house. It is obvious that one of the aims of the program is to fulfill the American Dream for the deserving families with different backgrounds, who all share one common trait: the hardships that they have experienced. You may hear many times directly throughout the program that the families have lived in hope of the American Dream. As an example for the Peter's Family (Session 3, Episode 35) it says:

"Winston and Hardai Peter left their homeland of Guyana in 1996 and struggled long and hard to make a new home for their family in America. They were on their way to achieving the American dream when tragedy struck. In December of 2004, their tri-level colonial house burst into flames, depriving them not only of their home but all their possessions. Penniless and without other recourse, the Peters were forced to move back into their burned out house.

In this episode of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, the design team heads to Queens to help this family rise above ashes so they may live out their American dream in their new American dream home!"

So the American dream and the quality of expected life standards of an American are portrayed in the show. Ratliff (2007) believes that the current wrecked house of the family is portrayed as an antagonist that hinders the family's path from moving through the successful road to the American Dream. The only aim of the family is depicted within the myth of the American Dream framework of the family struggling to provide the utmost opportunities for the success and content of their

children. Joan Faber McAlister (2010) says that by replacing a shed with a luxurious mansion and a dirt lot with a stadium-size yard, it promotes the idea of an American dream house in line with extreme consumerism of American products and homes. Unlike the past, the single space houses have been replaced with open floor plans, exposing state-of-the-art media centers, restaurant quality kitchens, and elaborate outdoor playgrounds. Jacobsen (2008) indicates that Home Edition encourages Americans to engage in the forms of extreme consumption which covers-up and worsens a housing crisis that has dramatically exacerbated in the post-9/11 era. It is investing viewers in a materialist version of the American Dream that is now "bankrupt". McAlister (2010) adds:

"Kairotopic analysis of this reality makeover show highlights the specific spatial temporal point to which the entire program builds, a revealing place-moment that repeatedly restages a public rebuilding of the American Dream in the form of the private family home that is to be the future dwelling place of deserving American citizen-subjects...Watching walls go from framing to finishing above a countdown to the owner's return (the crew has a total of seven days to complete the work) helps to bring the audience into a rapid reconstitution of the material signifier of American dream that is repeated each week in sites across the national landscape".

American Dream Class & Low-Income Families

Throughout the program, it is persisted that the American dream is an ideal that was set for all Americans and the dream has to come true during the program. Although the American dream says "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights" including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" but it doesn't say as to where exactly the boundaries of this "Equality" or "Liberty" and "Happiness" in life is.

The Extreme level of material life that this reality show portrays, gives the audience an expectation of where the boundaries of this American dream living might be; the luxurious massive house, with its fully furnished and best quality appliances. A level that many of the low-income families who have participated in the program might have never imagined achieving, because if they had the money, they would have been able to rebuild it for themselves and not apply for the show.

And of course this does raise the expectation level of similar low-income families who are watching in their path of fulfilling their American Dream, not only the homeownership, but the class of living that they should have while living in their house. Drawing from the Cultivation theory as discussed by Gerbner (1986), reality programs such as the Extreme Makeover raises these expectations by promoting the idea of the ideal mega-size homeownership of families who can't afford that standard of living. Exposure to such realities by the media shapes the target public opinion on that issue. This is where the problems begin.

There are two sides to the homeownership issue. Either the house has been fully paid for and is now the property of the family or the house has been mortgaged. On the former issues, despite the fact that the family had the money to buy the house, their income is not enough to fix it, or even reconstruct the damaged parts they are facing inside the house, such as cracked wall, cracked pipes, broken home appliances and est., considering the hardships they face which has made their lives hard to continue. Now if the house is replaced with a fully brand new equipped mega house, will they be able to pay the increased costs of living in this gorgeous house? This means higher property taxes, insurance, utility and maintenance bills.

As for the latter issues, not only the family would face higher property taxes, insurance, utility and maintenance bills, but they also have their mortgages to be paid which have now increased. Although in some cases their mortgages or property taxes will be paid off to some extent to pay the increased property taxes on a larger home, but the income of the family is still the same and they still have high bills to pay. With the above mentioned issues, most of the deserving families are likely to face financial problems, since their expenses have risen but no change has been taken place in their incomes. Harris Poll (2011) finds that two thirds (66%) of all adults have mortgages on their homes (table 3), also most adults (62%), whether or not they are homeowners with mortgages, are at least somewhat concerned that their family income was not enough to cover all their costs and expenses in 2001, even though the number is less than 2010 (65%). Naturally, the polls show: the higher the family income, the lower the level of concern. But among the lowest income group, the household incomes of less than \$35,000, 75% are fully concerned and 36% are very concerned as shown below in table 2:

The respondent have answered to the following question: "How concerned are

you that your family's income will not be enough to cover all your costs and expenses this year?"

Table 2: Concern on not Having Enough Income Base: All adults

| | 2010 | 2011 | Household Income | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|---------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| | | | \$34,999 or less | \$35,000 to \$49,999 | \$50,000 to \$74,999 | \$75,000 to \$99,999 | \$100,000 or more |
| | | | % | % | % | % | % |
| Concerned (NET) | 65 | 62 | 75 | 71 | 62 | 52 | 42 |
| Very concerned | 26 | 25 | 36 | 28 | 24 | 17 | 12 |
| Somewhat concerned | 39 | 37 | 40 | 43 | 39 | 35 | 30 |
| Not concerned (NET) | 36 | 38 | 25 | 29 | 38 | 48 | 58 |
| Not very concerned | 24 | 27 | 19 | 19 | 30 | 36 | 33 |
| Not at all concerned | 12 | 12 | 6 | 10 | 8 | 12 | 24 |

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

Table 3:How Many Home Owners Have a Mortgage?

Base: Adults who own home (72% of all adults)

| | 2010 | 2011 |
|---|------|------|
| | % | % |
| Yes, paying off mortgage | 69 | 66 |
| Had mortgage but it is paid off | 20 | 22 |
| No, do not have nor have ever had a mortgage | 11 | 12 |

By considering the latest poll of the amount of homeowners who are still paying their mortgages and a percentage of people who do not have enough income to cover their families' expenses, raises the possibility of the deserving families of the Extreme Makeover: Home Edition to face financial problems. Because of the higher costs associated with their new homes, these families have been forced to foreclose their new dream homes and this is what has attracted some criticisms from general public. In the next section a few examples of these cases are given to expand more as to how this might happen.

By clearlyaffiliating the fantasy of the myth of the classless society and the American Dream, a meaningful concept is made out of a bewildering set of events (Bormann, 1985).

Case Study

Extreme Makeover: Home Edition has been aired since 2003. Eversince, many deserving homeowners with low incomes have faced financial problems which have led them to put the house up for sale. Below are five of the cases mentioned as an example of how the families struggle to maintain their dignity in their newly built American Dream house as what has been given to them had been more than they could afford:

The Herbert Family: Eric Hebert, a bachelor, had been raising his late sister's 11 year old twins in a make-shift berm house until the Extreme Makeover Home Edition team came in to rescue him in 2005. They built him a 3,678-square-foot home which was listed for \$529,000 in May 2008, but he had to leave it for sale because he couldn't keep up with the utility bills and the fact that the economy had become so dismal. Since putting the home on the market, Eric Hebert has used the home as collateral on a defaulted bank loan in the sum of \$396,145.

The Hassall Family was given a 3,298-square-foot home in 2006. Brian and Michelle Hassall who work as a police officer and a teacher had adopted two children, and both parents suffer from health problems. Within 7 days, their friends and neighbors worked with the ABC show "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" to build the new family's home that would better suit their needs. But three years later, they had to put the house on sale because they couldn't afford the houses' maintenance bills. They were left with more than \$100,000 to pay off on their mortgage, and an increase in property taxes and utility bills. In February, the bank foreclosed the house when Hebert became unable to make payments.

The Holmes Family was built a mansion in 2006 by the Extreme Makeover: Home Edition team. She took a loan collaterally to support her store as a way to make a living and pay her bills. She said she used the cash to support the ministry as she runs out of the home and a thrift store across the street. But in 2010, the fate of that ministry and the private home were both in question. Holmes is asked the public for donations. She needed \$5,000 in two weeks to paylate payments on her thrift store's lease, gas bill and on the loan for her private home. In 2008, Holmes faced the county code enforcement board and nearly lost the property to \$15,000 in liens. Six years after the big reveal (in 2012), the home was officially foreclosed on after no one bid on the \$229,000 home at a foreclosure auction. In

2010, when she was about to lose the home to foreclosure, Holmes said:

"We're at the point where we can no longer do this by ourselves, with the economy failure a year ago, we started down spiral. So where we're at today is we're struggling, I can't keep taking from my family and my own person because I'm not a billionaire."

In 2009, the Wafford family was tackling hard as they were facing foreclosure by the bank. Their 1,212 square foot house was expanded to a 4,337 square foot house, adding amenities such as a gym and backyard hot tub with a built-in, 15-inch flat-screen TV in 2004. After the house was rebuilt, their property tax bills doubled. As the economy plummeted into recession, and Wofford's business struggled with lower health insurance reimbursement rates. His financial problems stemmed mainly from his family medical bills and the declining income from his chiropractic practice. He owed \$770,000 on the house, including \$140,000 in home equity loans.

The Okvath family was struggling with pay bills after they were built a 5,300 square foot home which has 6 bedrooms, 5.5 baths, and a 3-car garage big enough for four cars. The over-the-top feature is a 12 seat home theater. The family had 7 children with their eldest daughter, Cassandra, struggling with cancer. This is despite the fact that their mortgage had been paid off by a donor, Electricity bills (up to \$500) and property taxes were paid for a year and they were also covered by the state insurance program which meant the family could earn a maximum of about \$5,000 a month. But soon came in the dim side of the story, and the property taxes on the home quintupled. Although they no longer had rent a house, but utility bills soared past the \$500 that the homebuilder had paid each month for the first year. The first few bills were about \$800, and by the summer, they were reaching \$1,200. Soon, the father of the family lost his job at a fire extinguishing company, got another one as a truck driver, but injured himself on the job. The family felt that it was impossible to keep up with the bills, so they decided to put the house on sale in 2009. Nichol Okvath, Cassandra's mother says:

"A lot of people think we're rich, but we have nothing. We live paycheck to paycheck. We have no cushion anymore. If your house is quadrupled in size, they say your bills quadruple too; but Bryan's paycheck did not quadruple in size. We haven't found a job that could adequately support our house. We told the media

(that) we'll never move, this is the house of our dreams, but then we sat down and went through the numbers. (It was) three to four years, and then we can't live here anymore. We'll stay here as long as we can, and then we'll have to sell it."

Conclusion

As mentioned in the article, it is believed that the program *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* sets boundaries as to where the ideal American Dream Home stands and how it should look like in line with a Cultivation theory approach which supports the TV's role in shaping the views and realities of the target audience. The theory does not believe television viewers have a choice in whether they are affected by media or not. Gerbner and Gross say "television is a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviors, its function is in a word, enculturation" (p. 175). Media fulfills certain needs for people including the need for parasocial relationships or "a sense of friendship or emotional attachment that develops between TV viewers and media personalities

It should be added that this article does not underestimate good efforts that have been made in this program, the admirable task and intention which is put into helping people who are in need of that help, even though it should not undermine the endeavor by not calculating whether or not the proposed house is affordable for the family it is designed for. If the expenses, such as their mortgage, property taxes and utility bills, hit higher than the family's gross income, then the whole project is set to be gone in vain. Although it is a Dream House, but it should fit well within the realities of the target family in order to maintain the goal of the American Dream, in which the whole idea is success and happiness for all.

When the costs are not calculated, it turns the Dream's happiness into a misery, making it worse for the owners. The family which had already owned a home would now have to foreclose it due to the high expenditures and loans in which they had to go through in order to maintain their situation as it has been enhanced.

The fact is that not only the program has created a wandering situation for the family, but it has raised the expectations to an ideal lavish home in the minds of those viewers who sympathize with the family or live in the same standard. This can lead to a more materialized version of the American dream rather than the non-materialistic side of the definitions of happiness and success, which is

portrayed through the medium of the media; in this case, the Extreme Makeover: Home Edition reality show. As said by Karl Marx, ideology is expressed through cultural artifacts, which are designed by default to reflect and promote the interests of the dominant social class, due to that class ownership and control of the medium (White 164). This designed "cultural artifacts" here can connote to the lavish standards of living portrayed for the deserved family via the "dominant social classes" medium, which is the media or the reality show.

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