Chapter 11

Media and culture theories: meaning-making in the contemporary social world

- MMOs: stands for massively multi-player online role-playing game
- These are video games online in which players control a character avatar within a persistent game world
- The major ones are: Second Life; World of Warcraft; Entropia Universe; Sims Online (there are many others)
- In these games you create your own character and play or explore within that environment.
- In Second Life you can create multiple avatars, either gender
- You can 'buy' islands and clothes for Lindens (real money for large amounts of SL currency)

- The "real" world has had an impact on these MMOs
- Companies have bought islands on Second Life (although, this is not a significant proportion at this time and the investment is limited)
- You can enter a SL Pizza Hut and order a pizza delivered to your home.
- For World of Warcraft the interaction is much different.
  - Affluent online users of WoW pay poor Chinese (called gold farmers) to play the game for 12 hour shifts in order to win rewards for the affluent player who, in turn, can get real cash

- Thus, these MMOs are not some type of utopia worlds to bring people together, although that is the hope of many users
- UNLV has worked with a research institution in Israel to test nonverbal interactions
- These researchers (in Israel) want to use Second Life to allow for political communication.
  - Eg. Have Palestinians create avatars as well as Israelis to communicate more effectively

- Do MMOs constitute global communities?
- Reuters and CNET news services staff Second Life bureaus with real jounalists in avatar form
- Thus, there is now the foundation for real and online or "second" lives
- There are some technical limitations
  - E.g. you can fly in and out of places at will
  - You can be shot; defamed, etc.

Symbolic interactionism

- This theory suggests that people give meaning to symbols and that those meanings come to control those people
- You are what you verbally communicate …your world is symbolic to a large extent
- Much like Lippmann's the pictures in our heads of the world outside
- The researchers are social behaviorists: they view learning that focuses on the mental processes and the social environment in which learning takes place
- Unlike traditional behaviorists, social behaviorists reject simplistic conceptualizations of stimulus-response conditioning
- They also believe that the social environment is important

- George Herbert Mead was a founder of symbolic interactionism
- He suggested that rather than looking at people acting like rats in a maze, we should look at people learning a game, like baseball
- You learn all the rules and there is mutual conditioning (you know what 3 strikes mean; you play offense and defense; you can sometimes play multiple roles…a "utility player")

- Baseball was like a microcosm of society
- Over time we internalize the rules inherent in various situations and structure our actions accordingly
- Once internalized, these roles provide us with a powerful means of controlling our actions
- In time, our identity becomes bound up with them- we understand ourselves emotionally and mentally in terms of the roles we play
- It is a microscopic theory: Mead assumes that baseball teams operate as a sort of democracy
- But where do the teams come from? Who sells the tickets? Etc.?

- The baseball analogy doesn't work for MMOs
- Unlike rules of a game, in Second Life there are really no rules…you adapt your norms to those avatars (again these are real people next door or around the world) to theirs
- You have to use language software online often if interacting with avatars from another country; although many people in the world seem to know some English

- About 50% of the female avatars in World of Warcraft are created by men
- And, in SL, you don't know if the "woman" you're talking to is a woman
- So gender bending and rule-less environment is exhibited in these MMOs

symbols

- Mead added another important aspect to the socialization process
- Symbols: arbitrary and often quite abstract representations of unseen phenomena
- The words we use are arbitrary vocalizations that are essentially meaningless except to others who know how to decode them
    - E.g. Mon nom si le professeur Ferri et moi enseignent cette classe.

- In *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934) Mead suggests that we use symbols to create our experience of consciousness (mind), our understanding of ourselves (self), and our knowledge of the larger social order (society)

Pragmatism and the Chicago School

- Pragmatism was created in America as a reaction against ideas developed in Europe about idealism and simplistic forms of behaviorism

- Mead was really looking at communities as creating and propagating culture

- We act in communities and we are mutually conditioned to learn culture in our communities

- For pragmatists, the basic test of the power of culture is the extent to which it effectively structures experience within a community
- When some aspect of culture loses its effectiveness, it ceases to have effect
- Eg. Old phrases like "23 skidoo" or "the skinny"
- Culture is constantly changing and new elements are developed and old ones abandoned
- The Chicago School saw the city as one large study area for culture…a classroom and lab if you will

- Robert Park was a journalist who studied philosophy and was part of this pragmatist theory
- He once distinguished between "an acquaintance about something" versus "knowledge"
- cities were places where new forms of culture could be created
- Park saw newspapers as playing an essential role
  - They transmitted news
  - They also helped create culture and public opinion

Signs (also affect culture and how we understand it)

- Any element in the environment used to represent another element in the environment
  - Natural signs…when the leaves turn color for fall
  - Artificial signs…shaking hands

Social constructionism

- This theory argues that individuals' power to oppose or reconstruct important social institutions is limited

- Social construction institutions includes schools, businesses, military, government

- According to social constructionists, these institutions have enormous power over culture because we as individuals view the culture they propagate as having *reality beyond our control*

- E.g. the saying about the real world and school
- What is the real world? Don't you really have to get good grades in the 'unreal' world of school?
- Your daily life in college is not some fantasy
- The work world is real because we may have less control over those institutions (business, etc.)
- Real means that work is socially constructed with less input from us and therefore more beyond our personal control than is college (e.g. you can pick a major, certain courses, make mistakes and retake a course, etc.)

- In the social construction of reality, media audiences are seen as active
- Mass com audiences are active
- Audiences don't just take in messages passively…
- However, the media can serve as an important way for social institutions to transmit culture

- Symbols have little value unless they are shared
- Driving a Lexus vs a VW means something in our culture
- Don't we treat the Lexus driver differently than the VW driver?
- Yet the "realties" is that both cars are simply forms of transportation…but not in the social construction of reality

Alfred Schutz

- A banker who was amazed at how Americans routinely accepted that money..identically printed on standard pieces of paper, could radically differ in value
- And yet, the introduction of a coin dollar (like in Canada) has never worked in our social construction of reality
- Would there be a revolt if they stopped printing dollar bills in the US?

Phenomenology

- A theory developed in Europe that focuses on individual experience of the physical and social world
- Not the empirical, outside definition of that world into categories
- Schutz asked his students to set aside their commonsense explanations for what they were doing and recognize that everyday life was actually much more complicated than they imagined
- We behave via stocks of social knowledge using 'typifications' or stereotypes or schemas

- Eg. The exercise in the book on which state has the highest divorce rate?

Mississippi, Oklahoma, or Connecticut?

Answer…the liberal Connecticut…

And there are other stereotypes in the exercise on page 311

- Peter Berger and Thomas Luchmann's The Social Construction of Reality (66) argued this theory
- They did not mention mass media
- News anchors and career barrier research (Ferri, Ferri and Keller, Engstrom and Ferri) demonstrated that women anchors are stereotyped for certain news stories both in the past and still today..and beauty is most important

Framing

- From Goffman to Davis and Baran, we get our messages both from everyday life and from media

- Sometimes we confuse the two

- So, the media intrude into the "truth" about events, in a benign way

- A frame would be a specific set of expectations used to make sense of a social situation at a given point in time

- How do you know or what do you know about political candidates?
  - Via personal interactions perhaps
  - From media
  - The blending or merging of the two creates certain expectations
  - The media are important in this framing process
  - The interactive media (MOMs, internet, etc.) really merge the two framing directions…eg. What is a blog? Everyday life or media? What if you meet the blogger?

Cultivation analysis

- George Gerbner's theory that television cultivates or creates a worldview that, while possibly inaccurate, becomes the reality because people believe it to be so
- Violence index. More violence on TV than in real life
- Even if the cultivation is not as strong, but the direction is the same, its effect is the same
- Ice age analogy: even small changes in the earth's temperature can lead to dramatic changes in the climate

Everyday encounters

Media messages
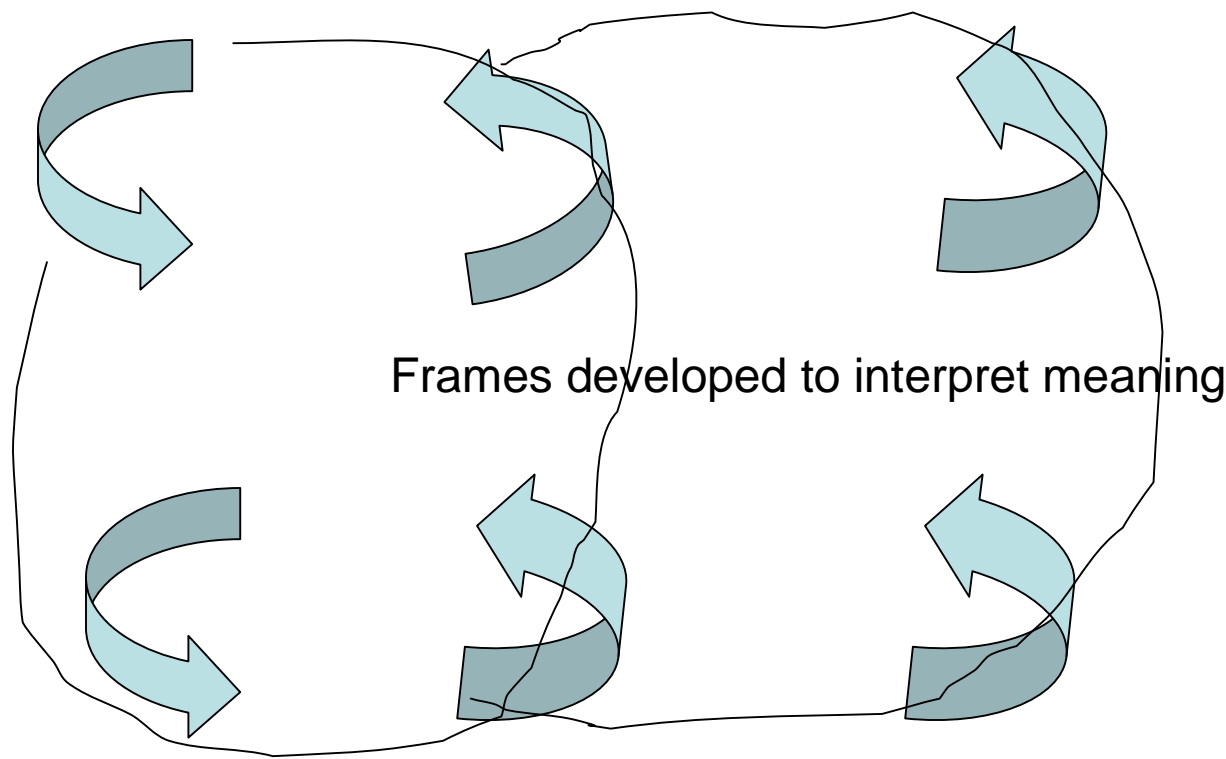
Frames developed to interpret meaning