



Communication Theories I, Session 05

## SELF AND MESSAGES

### 1

- **Symbolic Interaction Theory (George Herbert Mead)**
- **Coordinated Management of Meaning (Pearce & Cronen)**

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## Four theories highlight

- How we process meaning is the cornerstone of our first section of theories, which we have labeled “The Self and Messages.”
- Four theories highlight the prominent role of intrapersonal communication in meaning making.

### 1. **First, Symbolic Interaction Theory**

explores the interplay between the self and the society in which we live.

- Symbolic interactionists argue that people act toward other people or events on the basis of meaning they assign to them.

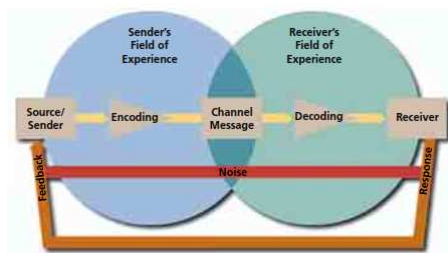
### 2. **The Coordinated Management of**

**Meaning** is also concerned with achieving meaning; however, the theory goes a bit further. It states that people will apply a personal set of rules to try to understand a social situation.

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3. **Cognitive Dissonance Theory** also looks at a person's ability to manage meaning and the need for people to avoid listening to views opposite their own.
4. **Expectancy Violations Theory** looks specifically at what happens when someone violates our expectations. The theory suggests that we will judge a violation as either good or bad and act accordingly in the conversation.

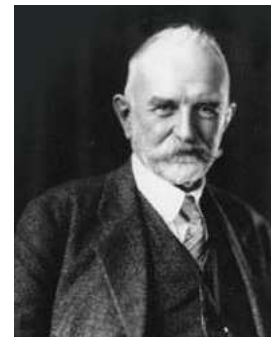
#### Basic Model of Communication



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## SYMBOLIC INTERACTION THEORY

- **Achieving meaning** is critical in our lives. We can't get too far in our conversations unless we understand others and can make ourselves understood. Understanding messages is what the meaning-making process is all about.
- **Meaning**, therefore, requires us to assess our own thinking and also to be prepared to assess how others interpret our messages.



**George Herbert Mead:**  
"Symbolic Interaction Theory"

**Born February 27, 1863**  
**South Hadley, Massachusetts**  
**Died April 26, 1931 (aged 68)**  
**Chicago, Illinois**

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## Themes and Assumptions of Symbolic Interaction Theory

- **Symbolic Interaction** is based on ideas about the self and its relationship to society. Because this can be interpreted very broadly, we wish to spend some time detailing the themes of the theory and, in the process, reveal the assumptions framing the theory.
- **LaRossa and Reitzes** (1993) have examined Symbolic Interaction Theory as it relates to the study of families. They note that seven central assumptions ground the theory and that these assumptions reflect three central themes:
  - the importance of **meanings** for human behavior
  - the importance of **the self-concept**
  - the relationship between the **individual and society**

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## The Importance of Meanings for Human Behavior

- **Symbolic Interaction Theory** holds that individuals construct meaning through the communication process because meaning is not intrinsic to anything. It takes people to make meaning.
- **According to LaRossa and Reitzes**, this theme supports three main assumptions, which are taken from Herbert Blumer's (1969) work. These assumptions are as follows:
  - **Humans act** toward others on the basis of the meanings those others have for them.
  - **Meaning is created** in interaction between people.
  - **Meaning is modified** through an interpretive process.

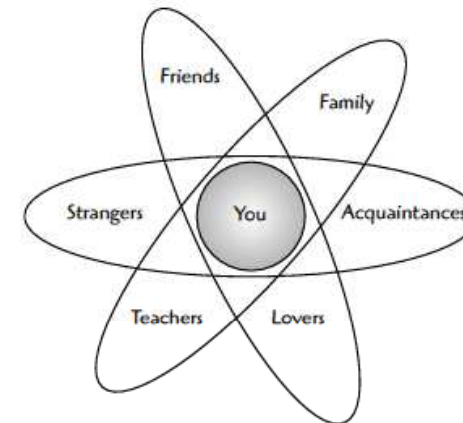
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## The Importance of the Self-Concept

- **The second overall theme focuses** on the importance of the self-concept, or the relatively stable set of perceptions that people hold of themselves.
- **Self-concept:** a relatively stable set of perceptions people hold about themselves
- According to LaRossa and Reitzes (1993):
  - **Individuals develop self-concepts** through interaction with others.
  - **Self-concepts provide** an important motive for behavior. In fact, it is likely that you will feel confident in all of your courses.
- This process is often called **the self-fulfilling prophecy**, or the self-expectations that cause a person to behave in such a way that the expectations are realized.

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Figure 5.1 How the Self-Concept Develops



- **Self-fulfilling prophecy:** a prediction about yourself causing you to behave in such a way that it comes true

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## The Relationship Between the Individual and Society

- **The final theme pertains** to the relationship between individual freedoms and social constraint. Mead and Blumer took a middle position on this question.
- **They tried to account** for both order and change in social processes. Assumptions relating to this theme include the following:

- **People and groups are influenced** by cultural and social processes.
- **Social structure is worked** out through social interaction.



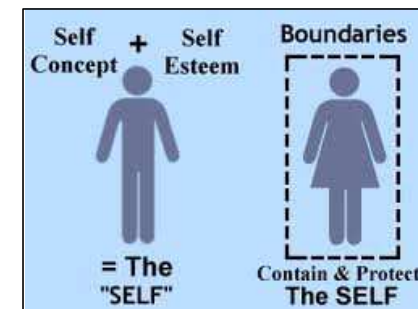
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## THEME AND ASSUMPTION

- **The themes that ground** the theory and the assumptions they support.

### Themes

- **The importance of meanings** for human behavior
- **The importance of the self-concept**
- **The relationship** between the individual and society



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## Assumptions

- **Humans act** toward others on the basis of the meanings those others have for them.
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- **Individuals develop self-concepts** through interaction with others.
- **Self-concepts provide** an important motive for behavior.
- **People and groups** are influenced by cultural and social processes.
- **Social structure** is worked out through social interaction.

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## Key Concepts

- **Mead's thinking** was titled *Mind, Self, and Society*. The title of the book reflects the three key elements of Symbolic Interaction.
- **Mind:** the ability to use symbols with common social meanings.
- **Language:** a shared system of verbal and nonverbal symbols.
- **Significant symbols:** symbols whose meaning is generally agreed upon by many people.
- **Mead defines mind** as the ability to use symbols that have common social meanings, and Mead believes that humans must develop minds through interaction with others.
- **Language depends** on what Mead calls significant symbols, or those symbols that evoke basically the same meaning for many people.
- **Thought:** an inner conversation

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## Self

- **Mead defines self as the ability** to reflect on ourselves from the perspective of others. From this you can see that Mead does not believe that self comes from introspection or from simply thinking on one's own.
- **Self:** imagining how we look to another person.
- **Looking-glass self:** our ability to see ourselves as another sees us.
- **Mead's notion of the looking-glass self** implies the power that labels have on self-concept and behavior. This power represents a second type of self-fulfilling prophecy. Self-fulfilling prophecies as being self-expectations that affect behaviors.
- **Pygmalion effect:** living up to or down to another's expectations of us.

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## The "I" and "Me"

- **The "I":** the spontaneous, impulsive, creative self.
- **The "Me":** the reflective, socially aware self.
- **As Mead theorizes about self,** he observes that through language people have the ability to be both subject and object to themselves.
- **As subject, we act, and as object,** we observe ourselves acting. Mead calls the subject, or acting self, the I and the object, or observing self, the Me.
- **The I is spontaneous, impulsive,** and creative, whereas the Me is more reflective and socially aware.
- **Mead sees the self** as a process that integrates the I and the Me.

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## Society

- **Mead argues that interaction** takes place within a dynamic social structure that we call culture or society.
- **Mead defines society** as the web of social relationships that humans create. Individuals engage in society through behaviors that they choose actively and voluntarily.
- **Society thus features an interlocking** set of behaviors that individuals continually adjust.
- **Society exists prior to the individual**, but is also created and shaped by the individual, acting in concert with others (Forte, 2004 in West and Turner, 2010).
- **Society:** the web of social relationships humans create and respond to.

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- **Society, then, is made up of individuals**, and Mead talks about two specific parts of society that affect the mind and the self.
- **Mead's notion of particular others** refers to the individuals in society who are significant to us. These people are usually family members, friends, work colleagues, and supervisors.
- **Particular others:** individuals who are significant to us.
- **Generalized other:** the attitude of the whole community.



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## COORDINATED MANAGEMENT OF MEANING THEORY

- **Based on the research** of W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen
- **When individuals speak** to one another, they often fall into predictable patterns of talk and rely on prescribed social norms. To understand what takes place during a conversation, Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen developed Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM).
- **CMM helps explain how individuals** co-create the meaning in a conversation.
- **CMM generally refers** to how individuals establish rules for creating and interpreting meaning and how those rules are enmeshed in a conversation where meaning is constantly being coordinated.

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## All the World's a Stage

- **To describe life experiences**, Pearce and Cronen (1980:120-1) use the metaphor "undirected theater".
- **They believe that in life**, as in theater, a number of actors are following some sort of dramatic action and other actors are producing "a cacophonous bedlam with isolated points of coherence".
- **Pearce and Cronen indicate** that the actors who are able to read another's script will attain conversational coherence.
- **To shape their theory, Pearce and Cronen** looked to a number of different disciplines, including philosophy (Wittgenstein), psychology (James), and education (Dewey).

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## Assumptions of CMM Theory

- **CMM focuses on the self** and its relationship to others; it examines how an individual assigns meaning to a message.
- **The theory is especially important** because it focuses on the relationship between an individual and his or her society (Philipsen, 1995).
- **Human beings**, therefore, are capable of creating and interpreting meaning. There are a few other assumptions as well:
  - **Human beings live in communication.**
  - **Human beings co-create** a social reality.
  - **Information transactions depend** on personal and interpersonal meaning.
- **Social reality:** a person's beliefs about how meaning and action fit within an interpersonal interaction

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- **Social constructionism:** belief that people co-construct their social reality in conversations.
- **Interpersonal meaning:** the result when two people agree on each other's interpretations of an interaction. Personal and interpersonal meanings are achieved in conversations, frequently without much thought.



- **W. Barnett Pearce** is a Professor in the School of Human and Organization Development, Fielding Graduate University.

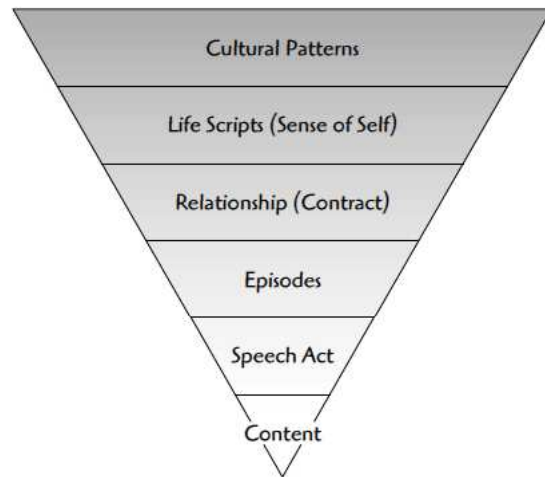


- **Vernon Cronen** is a Professor in the Department of Communication, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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**Figure 5.1 Hierarchy of Meaning**

Source: Pearce & Cronen, 1980.



- **The Hierarchy of Organized Meaning:** According to CMM theorists, human beings organize meanings in a hierarchical manner.

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## Six Levels of Meaning

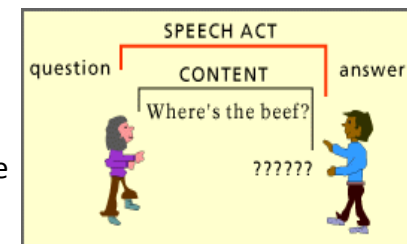
- **CMM theorists propose** six levels of meaning: content, speech acts, episodes, relationship, life scripts, and cultural patterns.
- **Content:** the conversion of raw data into meaning.
- **The content level specifies** the first step of converting raw data into some meaning.
- **Speech act:** action we perform by speaking (e.g., questioning, complimenting, or threatening).
- **Pearce (2007:105) describes speech acts** as a “class of very familiar things, such as promises, threats, insults, speculations, guesses, and compliments”.

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- **Episodes:** communication routines that have recognized beginnings, middles, and endings.
- **Pearce and Cronen (1980) discuss episodes**, or communication routines that have definable beginnings, middles, and endings. In a sense, episodes describe contexts in which people act.
- **Individuals in a communication** exchange may differ in how they punctuate an episode. Punctuation pertains to how interactions are organized into a meaningful pattern.
- **Punctuate:** how individuals interpret or emphasize an episode
- **Relationship:** agreement and understanding between two people.
- **The fourth level of meaning** is the relationship, whereby two people recognize their potential and limitations as relational partners.

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- **Pearce and Cronen (1980)** note that boundaries distinguish between “we” and “they,” or those people who are included in the contract and those who are not. The theorists use the term enmeshment to describe the extent to which people identify themselves as part of the relational system.
- **Enmeshment:** extent to which partners identify themselves as part of a system.
- **Life Scripts:** clusters of past or present episodes that create a system of manageable meanings with others.
- **Clusters of past and present episodes** are defined as life scripts. Think of life scripts as autobiographies that communicate with your sense of self. You are who you are because of the life scripts in which you have engaged.



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## Cultural Patterns

- **Cultural Patterns:** images of the world and a person's relationship to it.
- **Pearce and Cronen** (1980) contend that people identify with particular groups in particular cultures. Also, each of us behaves according to the actual values of our society.
- **These values** pertain to sex, race, class, and spiritual identity, among others. Cultural patterns, or archetypes, can be described as "very broad images of world order and [a person's] relationship to that order" (Cronen & Pearce, 1981, p. 21).
- **Individualism:** prioritizing personal needs or values over the needs or values of a group (I-identity)
- **Collectivism :** prioritizing group needs or values over the needs or values of an individual (we-identity) loop the reflexiveness of levels in the hierarchy of meaning charmed loop rules of meaning are consistent throughout the loop

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