

The application of Dervin's Sense-Making
Methodology to media reception studies:
Interpretivism, situationality and the
empowerment of media users.

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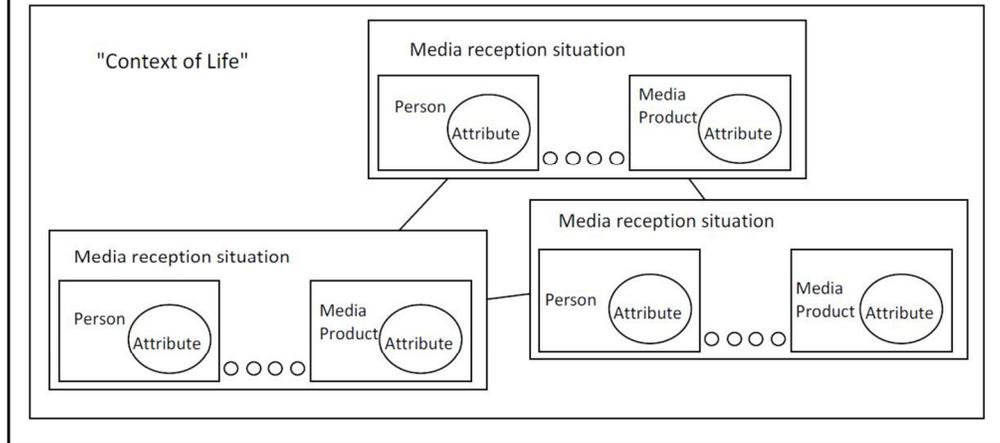
In this presentation, we describe how we used Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology -- which here I will abbreviate as SMM -- to study media reception. We used this approach because we saw it as addressing some struggles media reception research faces.

In my presentation, I....

1. present an outline of our definition of media reception as a situation of an audience member's engagement with a media product.
2. discuss how we used SMM to help us understand media engagement situations.
3. conclude with examples from one study, typical of the kind of studies we have been conducting.

Situations of Media Reception

Media reception at its core involves a situation in which a audience member engages with a media product in the context of everyday life, with the variety of ways that everyday life can impact, or be felt in, the situation.



Different discourses focus on the media reception situation in different ways. Almost all point to two central entities:

- * the person who is engaging a media product; and
- * the media product

This engagement is usually positioned as happening in

- * some kind of life context.

Both person and media product are usually ascribed with attributes.

While we focus here particularly on that branch of research called media reception, we have found this same portrait emerging in the wide variety of fields to which SMM has been applied to different kinds of audience reception work.

All the research communities we have examined acknowledge, to differing degrees, the importance of three factors in the media reception situation:

1. structures of the media product
2. structures of the life context, and
3. agency of the audience member.

Usually, however, emphasis is on only one of these. We have tried in our work to focus on all three.

In my next two slides, I discuss the model presented in this slide in a bit more depth.

Structures in Media Reception Situations

- External and internal(ized) structures are studied for how they can determine the outcome of the media reception situation.
- Media products, as external structures, exist completely outside of the audience member.
 - Technology of the medium
 - Content of the message
- Other external structures are assumed to become internalized over time.
 - Internalized through everyday lived experiences, and reflected in everyday behaviors, thoughts, feelings
 - Group membership, either sociodemographic or psychographic categories

Most approaches to studying audience reception emphasize impact of various assumed structures on the outcomes of media reception situations. Across studies, there have been several types of structures routinely examined. These structures have been conceptualized as being completely external to the audience member, or as external but as having impact by having been internalized by the audience member.

In some studies, the nature of the media product itself is cited as the primary determining factor. In this approach, it is assumed that media product features – characteristics of the technology and/or content of the media product -- cue and constrain the type of reception possible. The media product is seen as in some way dictating the parameters of the engaging.

In contrast, other studies emphasize how an audience member is positioned as a member of various externally defined groupings. Audience members are characterized with sociodemographic categories, such as gender or ethnicity; or with psychographic categories, such as need for cognition or sensation-seeking. The focus is not on the extent to which these group memberships are accepted by an audience member. Instead, membership is ascribed to the audience member. Internalization of the external membership is usually assumed to occur through living day-to-day in societies and cultures that define what constitutes membership to a particular sub-group. As we see it, the core assumption here is that if audience members share common fodder (for example, information, norms, values) from cultural, societal and communal memberships, then those audience members would be expected to act en masse in a particular way towards a particular media product. Researchers operating within this framework generally agree there can be no guarantee that audience members will react similarly within their group memberships. Rather, this thrust attempts to capture as much as possible of audience member differences.

Agency in Media Reception Situations

- While we cannot argue structural features do exist that may cue responses, we cannot know those responses without understanding the audience member's sense-making of them.
- Likewise, while we cannot argue group membership influences sense-making of these features, we cannot assume they are a determinant eliding over personal, situated sense-making.
- If we understand a audience member's interpretations to be the lynchpin of interaction with a media product for sense to be made from that encounter, then we need to understand the audience member's interpretive stance on these features.
- How does the audience member's views on his/her everyday life and struggles with membership categories relate to how s/he interprets the structural features of media products to produce something we as researchers would study as media reception?

Our essential argument is that attention to these structural factors is not sufficient for grasping a holistic understanding of media reception. We do not argue that these structures do not potentially cue responses. We do argue, however, that there is something more that we need to understand – how the audience member makes sense of these structural features and the play of these structural features in a given media reception situation.

Audience sense-making is, for us, the missing link in media reception studies. We argue that we cannot know how media products constrain and cue reception without attempting to understand the audience member's sense-making of them. Likewise, we argue that we cannot assume group memberships are a determinant eliding over personal, situated sense-making without also examining that sense-making. What needs to be accounted for is how the influence of structural factors are put into action in specific media reception situations.

Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology

- Our attempt to address all three contributing factors in a media reception situation simultaneously – media products, audience group membership, and audience member sense-making.
- For us, SMM has allowed us to work towards determining...
 - How an audience member makes sense of a situation of engaging with a media product
 - By accounting for his interpretation of various structural features of a specific media product
 - While also charting his view on group memberships that may or may not be important factors impacting the reception of this media product.

I now turn to how we used SMM in an attempt to address all three contributing factors in audience reception simultaneously – media products, audience group membership, and audience member sense-making.

SMM has allowed us to move further toward our goal of determining

- a) how an audience member makes sense of a situation of engaging with a media product;
- b) in that it has allowed us to b) account for his interpretation of various structural features of a specific media product while also
- c) charting his views on the group memberships that may or may not be important factors impacting the reception of this media product.

Group memberships can be charted a priori through sociodemographic and psychographic categorizations. However, more importantly for the discussion here, group memberships can be understood in how they are put into interpretive action by audience members.

Core of SMM Interviewing

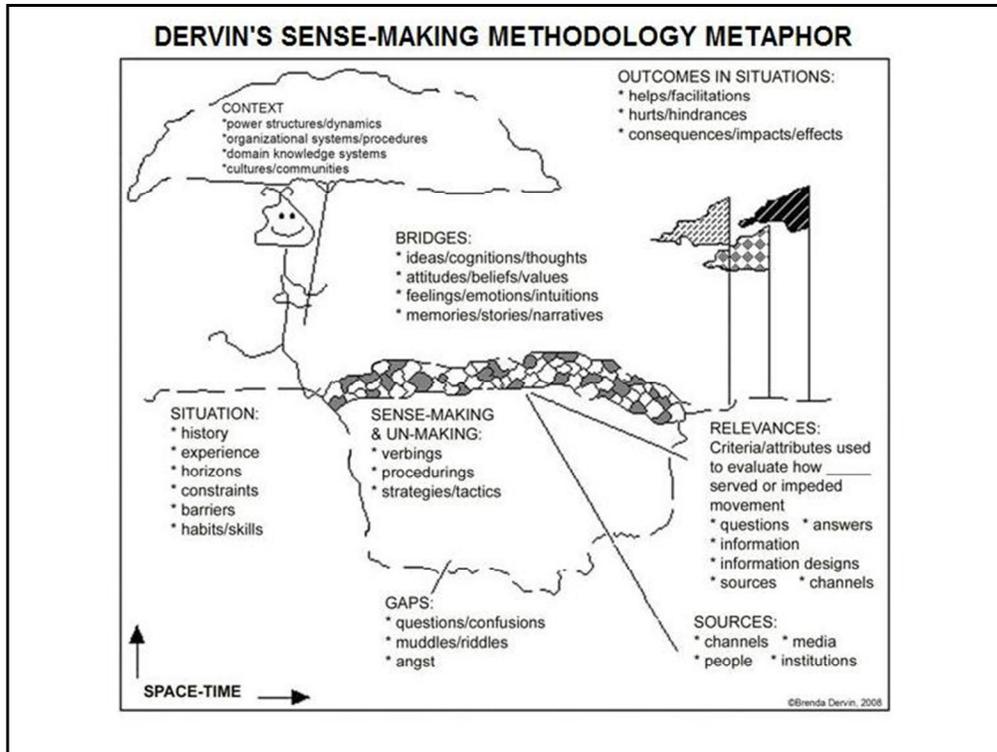
- What **questions, muddles, confusions** did you have?
- What **ideas, conclusions, thoughts** did you have?
- What **emotions, feelings** did you have?
- Was anything **helpful** to you? If so, how?
- Was anything **hurtful or hindering** to you? If so, how?
- How did what was happening relate to your **past experiences**?
- How did what was happening relate to your **sense of self**?
- How did what was happening relate to your thoughts on **power** and how it operates in the world around you?
- If you could wave a **magic wand**, what would you have changed?

Before providing an introduction to SMM , this is the core set of questions used in all SMM interviews:

These questions are all derived from a complex philosophic edifice that I will talk about briefly in a moment. More than 6000 interviews have been conducted over the past 25 years using this questioning approach in multiple fields.

We have applied this same core SMM interviewing template to our studies of media reception situations. In a process Dervin labels as an archeological dig, these core interviewing questions are applied multiple times in a given interview to changing brackets of time-space. In this way, SMM attempts to surround the situation as it was experienced by the audience member. The aim is to assist the audience member to a fuller and fuller recollection of how she saw what was happening in the media reception situation at that time, as well as before and after; and how she saw what was happening in that space relating to other times and other spaces in her life.

This is the briefest of overviews because this core set of questions is used flexibly in SMM in numerous ways. But the introduction will suffice for purposes here.



With that overview, here is the central metaphor of SMM that draws on a wide variety of philosophic sources. The core interviewing questions I just reviewed come from this metaphor.

SMM uses the idea of discontinuity or gap as a central concept in its methodological foundation. Gap is assumed to be a universal of the human condition -- this time-space moment is not identical to the last, nor the next. Time-space keeps moving and hence the sense-maker is always conceptualized in SMM as moving, as never complete, nor ever fully pre-determined. SMM does allow for repetitious, habitual, constrained interpretations and behavior. What is important is that SMM does not assume these in advance.

The focus on gap in SMM does not assume people are constantly stopped by ontologically real gaps. Nor does SMM presume that every time-space moment is filled with riddles, questions, and confusions. Rather, it assumes that methodologically the discontinuity assumption allows us to attend to how audience members make sense as they move through the before, during, and after of their media engagements. In some of these movements, there will be no questions asked, only repetitions of thoughts and answers and practices from the past. These repetitions are seen as bridges over the gap. In some, there will be abrupt stops and many accompanying questions. These question-askings and searches for answers are also seen as potential bridges. In some there will be confusions that never get resolved and time passes on with a bridge that never got built. In some, there are emotional experiences and they become the bridge.

SMM has developed around this central metaphor interviewing protocols that allow us to address how the audience member interprets the material and phenomenological stuff of their movements. Importantly, SMM implements procedures designed to impose as little intrusion as possible on the audience member's narrative while at the same time digging beyond surface stereotypes.

Example: Gendered Media Products

- Asked to recall four situations from lives
 - Engaged with something meant for men only once
 - Engaged with something meant for women only once
 - Engaged with something meant for men repeatedly
 - Engaged with something meant for women repeatedly
- Asked to pick one situation from each type to discuss in more depth.

I now turn to an example of how we used SMM. The example is a study I conducted to understand how people engaged with media products they saw as gendered -- as meant more for men versus women.

In my study, 21 male and 22 female college students residing in the US were interviewed. Participants were asked to list times in their lives when they engaged with media products that they saw as meant primarily for either men or women. Participants were also asked to recall times when they engaged with a gendered media product only once, or repeatedly. After constructing this list, participants were asked to select one situation from each of these types, resulting in mini-interviews of four situations.

Example: Gendered Media Products

- For each situation, interview began by asking what led to see as gendered
- Then the situation was explored using those core SMM interviewing questions
- For each core question, follow-up questions asked:
 - How saw that answer relating to life at that time
 - How saw that answer relating to assumptions about what is appropriate for men versus women

The mini-interview began by asking what led the person to see that particular media product as gendered. Then, using the core SMM interviewing template, we explored each situation in more depth. Further, each participant was asked to reflect on how she saw her responses to each of the SMM queries as connecting to her life at that time, and as relating to what she saw as appropriate for men versus women.

<p>TED, YOUNG MALE / MEDIA FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS, USED ONLY ONCE</p> <p>MEDIA PRODUCT NAME: I guess the girl's manga. Angelic Lair.</p> <p>WHY DIRECTED TO WOMEN OR GIRLS: Well, I guess...my friends, I didn't think about it at all when I first picked it up until a friend said, you know that's a girl's manga, right? I was like, oh yes, I guess that makes sense. A female-named protagonist, and they were fighting robots in it, kind of exciting robots, so I thought it was cool. I got interested in it because I saw some scenes that I thought were pretty emotionally compelling. And I thought it would be interesting. So I picked it up and I read it and I liked it.</p> <p>DESCRIPTION: I guess the first time I saw it or heard of it was...my friends and I had been looking through anime music videos. There was one particular one that I thought was really good. It made me...the emotional side of the music video and I saw the anime comic to it and so I thought it would be an interesting read. I guess that was my first encounter. But then I almost might have encountered it by random hanging out at stores which my friends and I did a lot at that age.</p> <p>QUESTIONS, MUDDLES: I guess after a point I wondered why it had to be a girl's manga when I was physically reading it. So I enjoyed it. I recognized the aspects but I didn't really so I kept reading it. Except I couldn't find that last issue.</p> <p>LIFE CONNECTION: Yeah, like I said, I was at the point of coming out, if not there, and so I didn't really care as much about gender stereotypes. I had gone from not really knowing much about stereotypes, to falling in line with them and trying to fit my life into them to not really giving a damn. I think that's where I was at the time.</p> <p>SENSE OF GENDERING: Say again? Yes. Because these sissy things, you know, were not supposed to be in my territory, but...I don't know how to answer it.</p> <p>EMOTIONS, FEELINGS: Yeah, I was interested in characters and I was caught up in kind of a struggle, I rooted for her...I did all the things you're supposed to do with a good story.</p> <p>LIFE CONNECTION: Maybe a little, with what I was reading I was getting used to rooting for the underdog. It was kind of a common theme that I encountered a lot and I felt comfortable doing it.</p> <p>SENSE OF GENDERING: Yeah, I don't think guys are supposed to care all that much, but I think that's changing, especially with big time movies where there's not a whole lot of action. But for the most part, guys like action movies, and action-filled things, and they root for the underdog because they want to see him kick some ass. And they don't root for people just because they're interested in them or like them or feel connected to them. I think it's generally not acceptable for them.</p> <p>HELP, FACILITATING: Yeah, it was cathartic, I'd cry a little, I'd be happy, the same thing as with fiction, I could get lost in the world</p> <p>SENSE OF SELF: I always wanted to be the hero, at that point in time, so I guess, yeah.</p>

This is a brief excerpt from the interview conducted with a young male, Ted, in his talking about engaging with a romantic comic book series, a media product he saw as meant more for women. There is too little time to read the text but I provide this so that you can see how the questions focused on....

- * the nature of the media product -- in PINK
- * the experience of engaging with the media product - in BLUE;
- * the follow up on each of the core SMM questions -- in GREEN

Interpreting Media Product Structures

Meant for Men

"The explicit content. They're extremely violent, and they degrade women. There are very little female characters in the video games, and when they are they're half naked."

--Carla, violent video game

"It's definitely a hip-hop sort of movie, and again the overt sexuality in that aspect."

--Barclay, Coach Carter

Meant for Women

"Romance is for women, sex is for men. Which is unfair, cause I love a good romp as much as a man does, and dating is about romance."

--Becky, online dating sites

"The female main protagonist. ... And I got interested in it because I saw some scenes and I thought they were pretty emotionally compelling and I thought would be interesting."

--Ted, romance manga

The following are examples of times when men and women discussed what led them to decide a media product was meant for men versus women.

In these quotes, participants are focusing on specific structural features of the media product as the relevant attributes for their decision. The structural features of media assigned as meant for one gender or another concurred with assumptions held in US society as to what is appropriate media content for men – action, violence, sex, sports; and what is appropriate media content for women – romance, dating, emotions.

However, while participants could tell readily point to the very structural features we would assume characterize gendered media, some did so in active resistance. In these cases, the informants reported that they were explicitly aware that they were either violating a "should" or that what they were doing as audience members was not seen positively by their society.

Interpreting Group Membership Structures

"I guess I was a bit confused because as kid I was kinda under impression that I could do whatever wanted, so why are these women at home and not taking an active role in the film?"

--Barbara, cowboy movies

"I know I'm a woman, and have sexual desires, but in my mind it's still hard for me to understand why a woman would want or feel the need to be in that industry, where it is much more acceptable for me to go yeah, a guy's into porn because that's all a guy wants, that's what we're told."

– Gloria, pornography

"The whole idea of a man being really excited to get the next season of a show that's just about a bunch of women and their dating habits, where the main character is a sex advice columnist, didn't jive with my image of what men want but I found it very compelling myself."

--Zane, Sex and the City

Here's a second example focusing on what men and women said about how they saw what their society and culture says about what is appropriate for men versus women.

In all three of these examples we find each man and women struggling to accommodate what they were being told was appropriate, based on their gender category membership in society, with some experience or interpretations from other aspects of their lives.

Concluding Thoughts

- Using SMM allowed us to understand the complexity of the intertwining factors that are involved with influencing the process and outcome of a media reception situation.
- In understanding how these factors intermingle within specific situations, we have been able to begin to move beyond the structures traditionally used to explain the ultimate result of reception.
- Of course, our SMM studies face challenges common to qualitative studies of media reception – time consuming, self-report, recall.
- However, we have found the ability to consider the complexity and power of intertwining factors to be a reason enough for us to begin looking at media reception situations with this approach.

Our research approach and these interview extracts were informed by the SMM metaphor, the core tool that organizes SMM's reliance on a broad spectrum of philosophic sources. SMM does not disagree that there are structural aspects of media and life conditions that constrain audience interpretations. However, SMM accepts fundamentally that no audience interpretation of a media product can be seen a priori as entirely written in advance. The interpretive acts of the sense-maker always have potential room to play. The question becomes how to conduct research in ways that allow us to address both a priori constraint and interpretive play at the same time.

Of course, SMM has limitations; all research approaches do. The deep qualitative interviews can make analysis time-consuming. Further, SMM interviews are based on self-report and recall. While SMM's philosophic edifice addresses this challenge, it is the kind of challenge launched against all retrospective interview data.

For us, SMM has given us a more holistic ability to study audience engagements with media products. SMM has helped us to understand the complexity of the intertwining factors that are involved in media reception and to go beyond solitary factor explanations. We have been able to more completely disentangle these factors from each other while simultaneously understanding how they interact with one another, as well as how they can be traced backwards, forwards and sideways into the audience member's everyday life.

Our journey down this road has only begun. We believe that in time we can begin to systematize our understanding of the interplay of these forces on situations of media reception.

For More Information...

Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology website:

<http://communication.sbs.ohio-state.edu/sense-making/default.html>

Thank you.