“I believe that cognitive psychology provides one of the main sources of insight for explaining culture,” writes anthropologist Dan Sperber (1996:3). “A culture is best conceived as a very large and heterogeneous collection of models or what psychologists sometimes call schema,” writes fellow anthropologist, Bradd Shore (1996:44). Nor are Sperber and Shore the only among anthropologists to have adopted cognitive perspectives in their analyses of and theories about people and culture and who have taken cognitive theories, ideas and concepts as their starting point. The ideas may be about the nature of society and everyday life, about religious beliefs, norms, myths and symbols.

Cognitive perspectives have influenced other disciplines, as well. Psychology, of course – where the perspectives originate – but also Education, Linguistics and Political Science, where they have been fruitfully applied in analyses of decision-making and policy formation (Stern 1999; Sundelius, in press).

Some writers speak of a “cognitive revolution”, referring to the fact that cognitive theories have taken the place of behaviouristic stimulus-response models within Psychology, but also that cognitive theories have influenced other disciplines, as well. Media research, however, has been influenced very little as yet. Perhaps because Psychology connotes – to an unwarranted extent, I would say – individualism, mentalism, psychologism. None of these things conform to the orthodoxy of the day, which tends to emphasize the collective, the social, the cultural, the contextual and situational.

There are, however, signs of a newly awakened interest in cognitive perspectives, even in our field and perhaps not least in the Nordic research community. Consider, for example the Nordicom anthology, Cultural Cognition: New Perspectives in Audience Theory (Höijer & Werner, eds. 1998) which presents articles that discuss media effects in relation to adults (Hagen, Höijer, Waldahl), youth (Erstad) and children (Rydin, Seip Tønnessen). Other Nordic media researchers, too, have argued for cognitive perspectives – for example, within empirical audience research (Findahl 1977) and the branch of film theory that focuses on viewers’ interpretations of film (Grodal 1997). Cognitive perspectives have been called for in other contexts, as well, without having been developed to any significant extent. According to Langer (1999), the need is recognized in
German media and communication theory, as well. All these signs may be taken as an indication that a growing number of researchers perceive a need of a cognitive paradigm.

Swedish public opinion research presents yet another example. In a recent article, Strömbäck (1999) presents new data on public mistrust of politicians and reviews earlier research on the subject. In study after study, traditional demographic variables like sex, age, education have proven to have very limited explanatory value, which leads Strömbäck to inquire after the “cognitive roots of [popular] mistrust.... Cognitive variables have considerably greater explanatory value than demographic, economic and media-related ones” (40-41), he concludes. Now, I am somewhat at odds with Strömbäck’s definition of cognitive variables as more or less congenital cognitive structures (page 23), and I find his attempts to measure these variables empirically in the form of interest or active disinterest in politics misleading. But his basic idea, that we need to pay more attention to the cognitive level, is important, I think.

What kind of cognitive perspective do we media scholars need? We have to ask, because there is no one cognitive theory or theoretician whom we can refer to, like a Bourdieu or a Habermas. Cognitive theory is a broad and varied field that offers a menu of many different theories to choose from. It is easy to find books entitled “Cognitive Theory”, but that is no guarantee that the theories in it will lend themselves to the study of mass communication, nor even that the book offers a decent account of the spectrum of theories.

Some cognitive theories really are too individualistic, too a-social and a-cultural. Take, for example, the research on artificial intelligence, where computers are used to simulate human thought, or neurophysiological brain research. The terms, “cognitive science” and “cognitive neuropsychology” often signal this kind of study. Within the so-called ‘information processing paradigm’ researchers study human attention, memory and problem-solving in psychological laboratories. Many have – with good reason – questioned the validity of such studies.

The work being done in these areas is not totally irrelevant to our areas of interest, but their focus on general cognitive processes and their neglect of cultural content is problematic. Other social- and cultural-cognitive theories are more relevant for those of us who are interested in the overall processes of cultural creation of meaning, in which mass media play a part. I will give a couple of examples of the kind of theories I have in mind, but first, I should like to say a few words about what “cognition” and “cognitive perspectives” are, and why we should take them into account.

“The Mind” – Verbal, Visual and Emotional

“The Cognitive Revolution” – was intended to bring “mind” back into the human sciences after a long cold winter of objectivism,” psychologist Jerome Bruner writes (1990:1). Cognition is about the workings of the mind, that inner mental plane where our thoughts, ideas, concepts and opinions, our inner metaphors, fantasies and dreams, interpretations and perceptions are generated. It represents our memories, our outlook, our perspectives, our conceptions of self, others and the world around us – in short, everything in the realm of human experience and thinking. It is a realm that is at once verbal, visual and bodily. Unlike the purely discourse theoretical perspectives that focus on verbal expression, cognitive perspectives include visual communication, as well (cf., Eysenck & Keane 1995, inter alia).
At times, there has been a tendency to make a distinction between cognitions and emotions, whereby cognition belongs to a system of rational concepts, whereas emotions are regarded as irrational, physiological conditions. One reason for this may be that computer simulations of the human mind have predominated from time to time – and computers don’t have feelings. Today, however, most psychologists consider cognition and emotion as belonging together (see, for example, Power & Dalgleish 1997). Every conception has an emotional component – a memory, association, interpretation or cognition that may be irrational; and some emotions can be extremely rational. Our feelings help us recognize what is important, give us good judgement. Research on emergencies and catastrophes show, for example, that people generally react and behave adequately, despite acute anxiety and fear: they seek out relevant information (via the media, for example) and follow recommendations as to what they should do (Nohrstedt & Nordlund 1993).

It is possible to distinguish between cognitive and emotional dimensions analytically, but in practice they are two sides of the same coin, and if our aim is to be able to say something about everyday interpretations and reactions, we need to include feelings in our cognitive interpretation perspective. They also form a unit in the sense that feelings are directed and have cognitive content. Pleasure and pain arise in situations, and if we are asked to think of a feeling like “happiness”, we think of situations or things that elicit that feeling. Asked to think about pain, we think of other situations entirely.

Outer and Inner – The Two Faces of Experience

Now, why should we be interested in mental processes? Isn’t it enough to see the creation of meaning as the result of our social and cultural experiences, of the context surrounding the creation of meaning and of conversations? I say, No, it’s not. I see several reasons to pay attention to cognitive perspectives – and, for that matter, even other psychological perspectives – the psychodynamic, for example.

All human experience has two sides: an outer, facing our social and cultural life and activities, and an inner, facing in toward our mental and psychic life. The outer and the inner are closely related, of course, but they cannot be reduced to one and the same. Our mental activity not only reflects social reality, it also interprets and reconstructs it. Cognitive theory enables us to grasp these interpretive and reconstructive processes, to understand how external experience is converted into internal perceptions and ideas, which in turn form frames of reference for future interpretations and so on, in an unending process.

Our behaviour is also determined to a high degree by cognitively internalized patterns of behaviour and how we interpret the world around us – situations, events, the people. Consider, for example, the recent Swedish elections to the European Parliament. That so few people bothered to vote – only 38 per cent of those eligible – is not just because of laziness or indifference; it is also a question of the interpretation and meaning people assign to the European Union and to the MEPs, the Members of the European Parliament – judgements which in this case are made primarily on the basis of media reports.

If we only consider people’s material, social and cultural circumstances, our efforts to understand meaning creation will tend to end up in a kind of social or technological determinism. By recognizing how outer experiences act via inner, cognitive processes we create a dynamic space in and around the individual. This may be particularly important in our postmodern era, when collective patterns of life are breaking down and
identities are becoming more variable and unpredictable. To take another example, this one having to with opinion formation: Young people’s political views are no longer determined by their parents’ views, and opinions are no longer as stable over time as they used to be. Election analysts note that “opinion formation takes place less and less within a collective frame, where socio-economic class, residence, leisure, etc., etc., reinforce one another as determinants” (Karvonen 1999:16).

A complex world, where we meet an ever greater variety of cultural expressions, where the flows of information are overwhelming and experiential discourses numerous, means a greater potential for variation in our interpretations. In order to understand what interpretations are being made, we need more psychological insight into how meanings are created.

Observing how external experience acts via inner cognitive processes, we also create space for change and development. If the individual is no more than a mirror of his or her external circumstances, then what we have is closed, constant systems which can only reproduce themselves, in which individuals lack all manner of intentionality and creativity. Who will there be to think new thoughts, to come up with new ideas?

This is not to say that I argue for replacing social and cultural explanations of meaning creation with psychological ones. Human beings and the cultures they create are products of both outer and inner forces, of historical, social and psychological circumstance. It is the interplay of these circumstances that is important. Culture forms our consciousness, but we form our culture and its consciousness. The reciprocity is important; nonetheless, psychological perspectives have remained underdeveloped in terms of theory in a good share of contemporary media research.

In this connection it might be interesting to look back at early media research, which was more in touch with the psychological aspects. For example, if we go back to Walter Lippmann’s classical *Public Opinion* from 1922, we find that Lippmann has entitled the introductory chapter, “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads”. His proposition is that we human beings form impressions of reality and that these images in our heads affect our behaviour. The prime task of the opinion researcher, Lippmann (1922/1950) writes, is to observe “the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of the scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action” (16f). Psychological theory came to play a central role in audience-oriented media research, but in time, the focus of attention came to rest on human needs rather than cognitive aspects – “the pictures in our heads”.

**Cultural Studies**

Unlike early media research, the field of inquiry known as cultural studies – surprisingly – has felt no need of psychological theory when dealing with the phenomenon of meaning creation. Yet Stuart Hall defines “ideology” in these words:

> By ideology I mean the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works (Hall 1986:29).

But, although Hall speaks of “mental frameworks”, he does not infer from that, that we need a theory of ‘the mind’. Indeed, the cultural studies tradition has made no efforts whatsoever to study mental frameworks. One who has made such an effort is discourse
Cultural-Cognitive Perspectives on Communication


Within the cultural studies tradition, however, interest in interpretation has been superseded by a focus on the practices and routines of everyday life, particularly collective ones such as those that take place within the family circle. Under the influence of neo-behaviouristic social constructivism, the question of meaning creation has been reduced to conversations about media texts, in which situational variables are decisive for the content of the conversation. Of course it can be very interesting to listen to and analyze what people have to say about the media, but is it reasonable to presume that it is the only, or even the most important site of meaning creation?

There is quite a lot of evidence to the contrary. Empirical findings show, for example, differences in TV-related talk, both between different families and between men and women. Upper middle-class families say that they seldom discuss TV programmes (Andersson & Jansson 1998), and other studies reveal significant individual differences between families (Holter 1998). The men in Morley’s (1986) frequently cited study of “family television” say they want quiet when they watch television and that, sports excepted, they seldom talk about things they have seen on television with workmates or friends. A British observation study found very little talking while viewing television (Gunter et al. 1997), and we note other indications that collective patterns are growing weaker. A growing share of households are ‘parties of one;’ more and more households own several television sets so that each member is free to watch the programmes of his or her choice; the proliferation of television channels and radio stations imply that fewer people have watched the same programme.

Most likely, only a very small share of all the media texts that people partake of are ever discussed, i.e., verbalized in conversations. Although it is interesting to study what elements people do ‘pick out’ and talk about, most mediated experience is processed and converted into what Michael Polanyi (1976) calls tacit knowledge. We carry this knowledge with us, and it forms the frames of reference – sometimes stereotyped, sometimes more dynamic – we use to interpret the real and symbolic world around us.

Cognitive Theories on Different Levels

Cognitive theory treats many different levels of mental activity, ranging from lower neurophysiological levels (e.g., the identification of simple sounds and visual sensations) to levels of categorization and conceptualization, and further, to even more holistic levels that have to do with our comprehension of complex cultural phenomena like social institutions and various discourses. It is, I think, these more complex cultural levels that probably most interest us as students of mass media.

Some theorists speak of our inner “pictures” of cultural phenomena as mental models (Johndon-Laird 1983; Shore 1996); others speak of mental schemas, or social schemas when wishing to stress their social origin (Cf. Fiske & Taylor 1991, inter alia). There are those who rather speak of mental or social representations (Moscovici 1984) or frames (Minsky 1975) or scripts (Schank & Abelson 1977). We might also talk about cognitions, categories/structures of thought or inner discourses (Harré & Gillett 1994).

Let me mention a few psychologists whose work I find particularly interesting. Jerome Bruner (1986; 1990) posits that human beings cognitively structure their everyday experience by means of narratives, stories. We create inner stories about ourselves, others, about the world, and we use a narrative form to comprehend the world around us. An interesting aspect of the narrative form that Bruner discusses is its spe-
cialized capacity to form links between exceptional and ordinary phenomena. Its base is our cultural conventions or norms – all the repetitive things that conform to norms and are generally accepted – but it helps us grasp and find meaning in unusual phenomena, in breaks with convention, as well. One of our main motives for sharing something with someone else is that it is something unusual, and the same applies in the media’s news values and fictional narrative.

“My story defines who I am,” writes Dan McAdams (1993:5). He has interviewed people about their lives and how they see themselves and has made a detailed analysis of the material. He, too, speaks of “the narrating mind” – in connection with how we construct our identities as inner stories about ourselves. Our identities can comprise several stories, sometimes even quite contradictory ones. I think there is a need for McAdams’ concept of identity as a counterweight to those who only consider outer, social factors as components in the construction of idetity. Theorists like Goffman (1959/1990), for example, who sees human beings as mainly forming their identity through playing various (outer) social roles. On this point Giddens (1991:53) is more discriminating when he points out that one’s identity “includes the cognitive component of personhood”.

To return to Jerome Bruner: He also posits a reasoning pattern of thought, which he sometimes refers to as “argumentative” and other times as “paradigmatic”. It is a more logical, conceptual kind of thinking, where argumentation and factual propositions are central. We learn this later in life; school and education are a major influence.

As students of the media it can be interesting to ask ourselves, first, what stories about our cultures, societies and our own identities do we construct with the help of mass media, and secondly, what lines of reasoning do we consider important and absorb in various forms into our conceptual universe.

Serge Moscovici (1984;1988) is a French psychologist who uses the term “social representations” for the kinds of thoughts and conceptions that people in given social groups share, a kind of common sense conceptions about society and ‘the way things are’. This sounds like Durkheim’s collective representations, but Moscovici stresses that his ‘social representations’ are more dynamic and flexible; they develop and change in various ways. Old conceptions fade away and new ones arise. This takes place via two kinds of cognitive processes: “anchoring” and “objectification”. ‘Anchoring’ is when we classify and identify new phenomena by comparing them with things we already know or are familiar with: Is it like or different? If it is fairly similar we add the phenomenon to our previous conceptions; if it is different we will have to introduce a new one. Objectification means that we take something that is abstract and difficult to grasp and turn it into something more concrete and easy to understand. Moscovici has studied how psychoanalytical concepts have become part of people’s everyday thinking and acquired a more concrete meaning. “He’s depressed,” we may say about someone who doesn’t seem to take pleasure in anything. This is the kind of cognitive simplification ‘objectification’ refers to. Metaphors are another way to simplify, a kind of mental shorthand that helps us to comprehend a complex social phenomenon. Moscovici’s theory of social representations has been used in a number of studies of how expert knowledge is converted into everyday common sense. (For an overview see Augoustinos & Walker 1995, Chapter 7.). The media play an important part in these processes, and it can be interesting to examine the relationship between expert knowledge and common sense in terms of three ‘cognitive’ links: the experts’ conception of his or her area of competence, journalists’ idea of the area and, of course, the journalis-
tic products that people partake of. The third link is the audience’s interpretations and ideas. Such a study would be a kind of diffusion study that would explore the depths of the respective worlds of ideas.

There are many more cognitive theories that might be of interest to us as media researchers and that have received some attention. We have, for example, the Vygotsky-inspired school that sees consciousness in a socio-cultural developmental perspective (Cole 1996; Wertsch 1991). Theories of attribution, which deal with how we assign causes to events and social phenomena, is another interesting body of theory (cf. Augoutinos & Walker 1995, Chapter 4.)

**Freedom of Thought**

The cultural studies tradition abandoned decoding or interpretive theory when audience reception turned out to be too complex to be explained by demographic and sociological variables, and researchers in that tradition have put increasingly heavy emphasis on situational contexts in their efforts to explain the interaction between media and audiences. Everyday life has become equivalent to routine practices, with consciousness left out of the picture. There is an undeniably behaviourist element in this; the difficult concept of ‘the mind’ has once again been rendered invisible.

What counts is who has his hands on the remote control and what people say to each other in dialogues and conversations. Not to discount verbal interaction in relation to television programmes, but our inner world of thoughts and reflections is so much more.

Our inner world, too, is a product of our culture in the sense that even our fantasies are based on and nourished by our culture. But the degree of freedom that prevails in our inner world is much greater. Our thinking is not as easily steered by rules and cultural patterns as our behaviour is. Our thoughts need not be polite or friendly, nor even sensible; they can even be ‘forbidden’. Our thoughts can wander here and there whereas we behave and communicate much more in conformity with social and cultural convention.

In my view, a very important part of the media experience is its impact on our inner world, which can be far freer than our outer expression.

**The Links Between Outer and Inner**

When it comes to the media and their audiences I find it extremely valuable to consider the dynamic between the outer and the inner plane, between social reality and our inner thoughts and sensations. Valuable for even other reasons than the level of discursive conceptualization and interpretation. I should like to conclude with a few words about these linkages.

We all wrestle with the problem of being an individual in a culture, with the problem of reconciling what we experience as demands made by our environment with our inner thoughts, hopes and needs. Experiencing mass media can be a link between our outer and inner worlds, mediating the dilemma or bridging the gap between external demands and our fantasies and dreams.

In the spirit of Habermas media researchers have studied and written a lot about how the media provide a link between Öffentlichkeit, the public sphere, and the individual. Cultural studies have focused on the media as links between people in, for example, a family or social group.
All this is important, but we also need to take a closer look at a third link – that between the outer and inner worlds inside the individual, the link between social conformism and personal dreams. I suspect that people would be far less prepared to spend as much time as they do with the media if there were not something in the media that plucked on these inner strings.

Translation: Charly Hultén

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