



Media, Film and
Communication

Working Paper Series

Visiting Scholar Revisits Erving Goffman's concept of Frames

Professor Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz – “Constructing Frames”, 21st March 2014, Department of Media, Film and Communication, University of Otago

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Visiting scholar Professor Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz presented a stimulating seminar in March that discussed Erving Goffman's contributions to framing theory, as part of the Media, Film and Communication Research seminar series. Professor Leeds-Hurwitz is the Director for the Centre for Intercultural Dialogue and holds the Harron Chair in Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. The seminar is informed by her co-authored text, *Erving Goffman: A critical introduction to media and communication theory* published last year. The audience's eclectic composition included staff and postgraduates from Departments of Theatre and Music, Archaeology and Anthropology, the Centre for Science Communication, the Higher Education Development Centre, and Media, Film and Communication, indicating the relevance not only of the continuing broad scholastic appeal of Goffman, but also the interdisciplinary relevance of Media, Film and Communication research topics within the University.

Professor Leeds-Hurwitz identifies the social linguist and visual anthropologist, Gregory Bateson as Goffman's scholastic muse, defining the term “frame” in a similar way to that proposed in his seminal work, eponymously titled, *Frame analysis: An Essay on the organization of experience*. Specifically, Bateson and later Goffman, emphasised the relation

between frames and behaviour rather than cognition. In other words, social frames describe how living beings organise themselves through their behaviour into roles in order to achieve personal and collective desirable outcomes. Professor Leeds-Hurwitz referred to Bateson's observation of various animals at play to illustrate how communicative behaviour is adopted and adapted in strategies of group belonging and survival. Conversely, both Bateson and Goffman identify the inability of people to frame the organisation of experience in different social settings as an indication of schizophrenia. Similarly, recalcitrant or criminal behaviour to deceive or mislead may indicate frame manipulation within a social setting. On a lighter level, jokes and comedy and other theatrical activity also represent frame manipulation by shifting a dominant framework or track into another *key*, which is understood by viewers. Professor Leeds-Hurwitz challenged the audience to take a closer look at other concepts discussed in *Frame Analysis* such as 'transformation', 'fabrication', and 'layering' to gain a clearer appreciation of Goffman's use of framing. Taken together their function and that of framing often differs from those making cursory references to his work. In such instances Goffman is frequently used as a preface to writings that construct frames as cognitive structures of reality. According to Leeds-Hurwitz, he would have 'hated this gloss', which shifts attention from behaviour to cognition.

Following her seminar, Professor Leeds-Hurwitz led the group in an interactive exercise to illustrate several of Goffman's key concepts, and also suggest their application to potential research topics. For example, instructional YouTube videos that present a dominant framework or track may be re-keyed into another frame through viewer posts in the comments section, which present an opportunity to unpack multilevel layering of communicative activity. In other words, social media presents new settings to explore the complexity associated with social contexts involving multiple role-playing and behavioural responses – communicative activity that fascinated both Bateson and Goffman.