

CHARACTER CASE CONCEPTUALIZATION: PROPOSING THE 3 Cs MODEL FOR DISCUSSING CHARACTERS IN MEDIA

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Abstract

Connection within fandom groups and enjoyers of media often focus on shared experiences of the target media, or what media they have seen. Discussion of these shared media experiences can be passionate and form the basis for long-term friendship or even rivalry. But what happens when broader fandoms encounter group members who do not share the same media experiences? Often passionate conversations stop dead, and moments of connection can become lost. This model seeks to combine psychological case conceptualization techniques with passionate discussion to create a new way for fans to talk about their favorite characters and series. The purpose of this new model is to create new points of connection that invite others into conversation rather than alienate those without the same shared experiences. An example case of this model is included to illustrate potential use cases.

Introduction

Communities of fans of media, often called fandoms, can be found around almost any form of media. No matter how these

groups express themselves, the media interest they share can form the basis for the shared experiences the groups create. In groups focused on one media this model can easily work, group members may all watch the same season of content or read the same book (Duffett, 2013). In larger fandom groups such as fans or fantasy or anime/manga this shared experience can break down (Reinhard, 2018). The authors of this work have experienced and witnessed many missed connections when an excited fan regales another with their passion for a story or show, only for the respondent to reply that they have not seen or read it.

This sort of interaction can be very common among groups of fans both large and small. Some of them are self-solving, where the respondent shows interest, consumes the mentioned media, and then reports back for a more involved conversation. This may be a best-case scenario, and perhaps even the intent of the first fan. This process is not immediate, however, and connection and bonding can be broken in the moment where the non-shared experience is realized (Reinhard, 2018). It might be useful to have a technique for bridging these awkward moments and turning them into connection.

Within the realm of psychology there exists such a technique, called case conceptualization. This process is often undertaken in the training of new clinicians, where trainees first apply theory and knowledge to fictional clients and later present their own work with clients (John & Segal, 2015). A case conceptualization may be thought of as a way to generate and refine a report or narrative of a client and their concerns as the clinician sees them (Ridley et al., 2017). Often such a report is presented by the sole clinician seeing the client, with others relying upon the report given to contribute their own theoretical and clinical suggestions for work with the client. In training spaces these presentations often precede deeper discussion about further work with the client (Ridley & Jeffrey, 2017).

Although not explicitly meant to forge connection, a case conceptualization has the effect of allowing one topic expert to communicate their knowledge to someone with no specific content (client) knowledge in a way that opens and deepens conversation (John & Segal, 2015). Application of some of the concepts and strategies for a successful case conceptualization could be tweaked to better fit fandom and media discussions with the goal of creating similarly deep conversations. The model proposed in this work is meant to be a starting point in this goal, aiming to apply case conceptualization techniques to create more open, passionate, and interesting conversations.

Case Conceptualization Techniques

One common way to view a case conceptualization is as the collective understanding of the presenter as it relates to the client. This understanding may consist of theoretical orientation of the clinician as a lens through which the facts of the case are viewed (John & Segal, 2015). Two clinicians presenting the same set of facts might produce drastically different conceptualizations if their theoretical orientations differ widely. This is sometimes of key importance to the training process of clinicians, where those with widely different orientations might share useful ideas that may be outside the scope of the thoughts of the presenter. These differences can thus strengthen the people involved and build rapport and community.

If theoretical orientation can be seen as a lens and a focus, the meat of a case conceptualization consists of the facts of a client and their life. How this information is presented may be tailored to the unique facts and needs of the client (Ridley & Jeffrey, 2017). These can be social, biological, cultural, and psychological. The challenge is often in synthesizing these pieces of information with the clinical concerns into a report that might explain the present concerns or show the need for present treatment. Clinicians presenting the facts of the case may even see or access different facts about cases, reinforcing the value of presenting conceptualizations to others.

Another aspect of a case conceptualization is the report of change or aim to create it in the client. In some cases, a

conceptualization is made to create collaboration on therapeutic goals with clients, informing potential interventions (John & Segal, 2015). This process can attend to patterns that exist for the client that link to presenting concerns (Ridley & Jeffrey, 2017). A conceptualization reported after the end of work might focus on how these patterns were addressed and reflect on the meaning behind changes that occurred in treatment. Attending to change, both before and after it occurs, is thus an important piece of a conceptualization.

Applications to Fandom Communications

In applying case conceptualization to fandom communication there are several components that can be tweaked to be more manageable for average communication. Each of these techniques can be used to enhance conversation between fans beyond initial hurdles, as well as deepen existing conversations further. This is meant to mirror the way that case conceptualizations can deepen knowledge and connection among clinicians.

In a clinical setting the theoretical orientation of the reporting party can serve as a focus to refine the information being supported. Life philosophy and types of fandoms can be used to achieve this same result. Someone describing themselves as a lifelong fan of fantasy might then present information in a way consistent with their interest. A thrill seeker looking for action might present a wildly different story. How these different fans understand the information of a piece of media can vary the

communication and deepen it. This could be especially true if the communication reinforces shared interest (mecha fan to mecha fan) or opens new channels of communication.

The meat of a conceptualization comes from the facts of the client and treatment, which maps nicely onto the events of a media series. Different people might present facts differently, but the key item is that they share what is important and meaningful for them. In these fandom communications it might be worthwhile to encourage prioritizing and synthesizing the most striking facts rather than rote reporting of a story or episode. The communicator of these thoughts might consider their goal in sharing. If persuasion to engage with the media is the goal, it makes sense to craft a report of the series that is compelling and interesting for the listener.

This point can lead into the intent of the report and how you cater it to the circumstances of the communication. An excited bit of sharing about a brand-new series might differ widely from a report several years separated from the watch. Attention to this could help a fan focus on creating a conversation that gets their point across. It may also help to increase mindfulness around how and why this conversation is starting. Intentionality might assist in communicating passion in a more easily digestible way. Another way to apply this concept would be to attend to the change the media had on the reporter. Extolling the virtues of a “cool” series might carry less weight than saying that one of the

characters was so well written as a villain that you actually punched the book in anger.

The Proposed Model: 3 Cs

The model we propose here aims to make some of the mentioned modifications to conceptualization techniques so that the ideas might be applied to fandom conversations more easily. This model builds off of other models of case conceptualization where it has been proposed that clinicians focus on themes, specifically their identification, interpretation, and how to intervene with them (Jeffrey & Ridley, 2017). In order to do this, we propose direct application of a set of questions to specific characters from the desired media. Speaking specifically about characters can accurately reflect tone and points of interest about media, but also ensure there is appropriate depth that the conversation can get to. We propose that fans choose their characters wisely to avoid unnecessary spoilers or creating confusion.

The questions proposed are as follows:

1. What are we seeing with this character?
2. How do we understand this information?
3. What can be done? What do we want to see happen?

The idea of this model would be for the excited fan to first mention a character in their interesting series and proceed to share some relevant information about that character. They might describe some

important biographical facts, context about the show, or even compelling character moments. Anything that communicates who the character is to the listener. This question is first because it serves as the gateway for the conversation to deepen. Either the reporting fan is giving their friend all the relevant information needed to contribute to the discussion, or they are emphasizing shared points that will be relevant to a discussion of a shared love.

The second question proposed enlightens the first. Why are these facts important? How might they be understood or viewed? If the first question is executed correctly, the second is where any party with any knowledge level can begin to contribute. The reporting fan will potentially have more to say, but now anyone can talk about those views. Even if the conversation partners have opposite views of events, they will still be interacting with each other at a deeper level. This phase is also where the interaction can come alive, especially in larger groups. Through this conversation people might be exposed to totally different points of view from their own and have a chance to engage with them around a potential shared interest. In conducting these conversations, the authors have also found that it is here that sometimes the most unexpected participants deliver the most profound insight.

The third question is meant to prompt thought experiments around how a favorite media might treat the topic, or perhaps how a completed series might have handled something differently. If a series is ongoing, what is something you would like to see

happen for or to this character? Now that it is over, what is something you wished you'd have seen? This phase tends to be where conversations deepen to the point of endless hypotheticals. Having fans endlessly egging each other on in wild speculation could be seen as a mark of a victory for conversational skills.

This model, a character case conceptualization, is meant as an offering to fans, a method to help create connections where struggles can get in the way. The questions are designed to be concise, easy to remember, and customizable to any piece of media. The authors have used this model in large group discussions about series ranging from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* to *Game of Thrones*, to *Harry Potter*. It works for essentially any character from any series if spoilers are to be tolerated. The authors submit that the system works especially well for controversial and divisive characters, where conversations can quickly deepen and perspectives can be widely varied.

Character Case Conceptualization Example

In the interest of illustrating the utility of this model, we will apply it to a favorite (of one author) and controversial character, Shinji Ikari from the anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Shinji is a 14-year-old boy who enters the series as the protagonist, newly moved to the city of Tokyo-3 after a summons from his father. Through the series we learn that he has been abandoned by said father 11 years ago after both witnessed the traumatic death of Shinji's mother

(Kobayashi, 1995). The young man is quickly ushered into a secret organization where he is forced to pilot a gigantic combat mecha to defeat otherworldly creatures and protect the world (Kobayashi, 1995).

From the beginning it becomes obvious that Shinji experiences significant relationship strains. His father cares little for him, despite Shinji's fervent desire to win approval. He begins living with his direct superior, an alcoholic and chronically inappropriate woman, and another young female pilot who is constantly abusive both verbally and physically (Kobayashi, 1995). For some reason he also co-habitates with a penguin. Over time Shinji begins to make friends, but these friends end up hurt or dead. Seeking guidance from others, he is constantly in turmoil from the advice he does receive.

Shinji also displays some signs of chronic mental health struggles throughout the series. He is often melancholic or depressed, struggling to find the meaning in his existence (Kobayashi, 1995). Anxiety is a common occurrence for Shinji, as is fear. In piloting his *Eva*, he constantly courts death, both his own and of many millions of innocents. This mix of fear and responsibility weighs on Shinji in obvious ways, and as a young teenager he struggles to cope.

All of these facts culminate in strong and somewhat constant bouts of distress. Shinji experiences panic, defies orders, and even notably refuses his duty to pilot the *Eva*. Once he even threatens to destroy the very organization he works for, killing people in a bid for revenge (Kobayashi, 1995). His

distress is evident throughout the series, and escalates all through it, with the final few episodes showing him being exposed to and forced to do some terrible things.

One way to understand Shinji is to view his life as a struggle of attachment, especially to figures of authority in his life. Shinji has effectively lost both parents and feels constantly betrayed and taking advantage of by others. This attachment wound applies to his relationship with himself as well, creating self-loathing and at times scary and dangerous behavior. As a young man seeking to understand the world, it is important that he has few to no firm connections that are safe and secure. The events of the series constantly rupture his sense of groundedness in the world at a critical developmental period.

Another way of viewing Shinji is through the lens of his trauma. Despite the larger-than-life aspects of the series, he is still just a traumatized child. Having watched his mother die at age three, he had very little chance to live free of the effects of trauma, which can have permanent effects. From this angle, Shinji might be said to be responding normatively to trauma. Anxiety, depression, and fear are common responses to early childhood trauma. Wanting for safe people makes perfect sense. Being overwhelmed in stressful situations is understandable, especially when the safety of the world is solely on your shoulders. It would be extremely unlikely for a traumatized child to simply have everything together in a healthy way.

So, what might we do with this information? In future telling of this story,

what might change for Shinji? It might be useful to see Shinji come to terms with his life and find a way to understand it. Not through how others view him, but through a relationship with himself. Valuing his own life and viewpoints might also create better opportunities to connect to others. A better understanding of why his reactions look the way they do might also benefit Shinji in making relevant changes.

Another opportunity would be to see Shinji form healthy attachments to stable people. A loving parental figure, mentor, or even romantic partner might allow him to heal past wounds and find more healthy ways forward in life. This might be especially useful in rehabbing the ways he interacts with others. Having stable support might also serve to allow him firm ground to explore himself and the world. This would be especially interesting for a Shinji who grows and ages through his teenage years.

Conclusion

The present work identifies some missed opportunities in fandom communication, especially around the mismatch of shared media consumption. To address these situations, the authors propose utilization of modified techniques from psychological case conceptualization, a practice used to train new clinicians. These techniques often have a partial focus on communicating vital information from those with experience of a client or situation to those without it, while creating a deep and open conversational space for learning. The authors propose a model of character case conceptualization,

where three questions are used to guide and deepen discussion.

The purpose of this model is to not only help communication, but to foster deeper love of media and stories that are important to fans. If fans can use this model to communicate that love more successfully, it will have been of use. In creating this model, the authors have had the joy to experience fandom communities across the United States and found not only deep and rich conversations, but also participation from sometimes the least likely sources. Truly, the point of this proposal is to create a system that anyone cause use, anytime, about anything, with anyone.

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