

Coordinated Management of Meaning –
W. Barnett Pearce & Vernon Cronen
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Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM)

of W. Barnett Pearce & Vernon Cronen

Transmission model

Picturing communication as a transfer of meaning by a source sending a message through a channel to a receiver.

Source → Message → Channel → Receiver

In this model, communication is considered successful to the extent that a high-fidelity version of the message gets through the channel and the receiver's interpretation of it closely matches what the sender meant. People who picture communication this way tend to focus either on the message content or on what each party is thinking, but CMM says they lose sight of the pattern of communication and what that pattern creates.

Pearce, a communication professor at the Fielding Graduate Institute before his death in 2010, and Cronen (University of North Carolina Wilmington) would undoubtedly extend their critique to the definition of communication we offered in Chapter 1. We suggested that *communication is the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response*. What's wrong with this description? Although the two theorists would appreciate our concern for relationship and response, they would note that our definition continues to treat communication as merely a means of exchanging ideas. They'd say that our definition looks *through* communication rather than directly *at* it. It renders the ongoing process invisible.

In contrast, Pearce and Cronen offer the *coordinated management of meaning* (CMM) as a theory that looks directly at the communication process and what it's doing. They believe communication is a *constitutive force* that shapes all our ideas, relationships, and our whole social environment. Because that process is complicated, the theory offers multiple insights into what communication is creating and a number of tools for changing our communication patterns. So we can grasp the essentials of the theory without being overwhelmed, Kimberly Pearce, Barnett's wife and president of the CMM Institute for Personal and Social Evolution, boils down CMM into four claims about communication.

Communication as constitutive

A force that shapes all our ideas, relationships, and our whole social environment.

FIRST CLAIM: OUR COMMUNICATION CREATES OUR SOCIAL WORLDS

Communication perspective

An ongoing focus on how communication makes our social worlds.

Kim Pearce starts with what we've just covered and then adds what communication does: "Communication is not just a tool for exchanging ideas and information.... It 'makes' selves, relationships, organizations, communities, cultures, etc. This is what I've referred to as taking the *communication perspective*."¹

Selves, relationships, organizations, communities, and cultures are the "stuff" that makes up our social worlds. For CMM theorists, our social worlds are not something we find or discover. Instead, we create them. For most of his professional life, Barnett Pearce summed up this core concept of the theory by asserting that *persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create*.²

Artist M. C. Escher's lithograph *Bond of Union* strikingly illustrates the core claims of CMM. It depicts a spiraling ribbon of tape that shapes the heads of two people and joins them together. The figures seem to be floating in space amid dozens of small globes. Unfortunately, I can't reproduce the art in this chapter, so I urge you to enter "Escher, Bond of Union" into your search engine so you can examine this vivid model of how persons-in-conversation are making the social worlds of which they are a part. I see three parallels between the picture and the theory.

First, Escher's art foregrounds interpersonal communication as the primary activity that's going on in the social universe. This squares with CMM's claim that *the experience of persons-in-conversation is the primary social process of human life*.³ Barnett Pearce said this idea runs counter to the prevailing intellectual view of "communication as an odorless, colorless vehicle of thought that is interesting or important only when it is done poorly or breaks down."⁴ He saw the ribbon in Escher's drawing as representing patterns of communication that literally form who the persons-in-conversation are and create their relationship. Their conversation does something to them quite apart from the issue they're discussing.

Second, the figures in the lithograph are bound together regardless of what they are talking about. This reflects Barnett Pearce's belief that the way people communicate is often more important than the content of what they say. The mood and manner that persons-in-conversation adopt play a large role in the process of social construction. He pointed out that the faces in *Bond of Union* have no substance; they consist in the twists and turns of the spiraling ribbon:

Were the ribbon straightened or tied in another shape, there would be no loss of matter, but the faces would no longer exist. This image works for us as a model of the way the process of communication (the ribbon) creates the events and objects of our social worlds (the faces), not by its substance but by its form.⁵

Third, the endless ribbon in *Bond of Union* loops back to reform both persons-in-conversation. If Escher's figures were in conflict, each person would be wise to ask, "If I win this argument, what kind of person will I become?" Barnett Pearce said it's the same for us. Our actions are reflexively reproduced as the interaction continues; any action we take will bounce back and affect us. That's also true with the social worlds we create. Pearce wrote, "When we communicate, we are not just talking about the world, we are literally participating in the creation of the social universe."⁶ And, like the figures in the lithograph, we then have to live in it. Like it or not, our communication has an afterlife.

These ideas identify CMM theorists and practitioners as *social constructionists*—curious participants in a pluralistic world. Barnett Pearce said they are *curious* because they think it's folly to profess certainty when dealing with individuals acting

Social constructionists

Curious participants in a pluralistic world who believe that persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create.

out their lives under ever-changing conditions. They are *participants* rather than spectators because they seek to be actively involved in what they study. They live in a *pluralistic world* because they assume that people make multiple truths rather than find a singular Truth.⁷ So Escher's *Bond of Union* is an apt representation of persons-in-conversation even when one or both parties are CMM advocates.

SECOND CLAIM: THE STORIES WE TELL DIFFER FROM THE STORIES WE LIVE

Coherence

The process of making and managing meaning by telling stories.

CMM uses the term *story* to refer to much of what we say when we talk with others about our social worlds—ourselves, others, relationships, organizations, or the larger community. Pearce and Cronen claim that communication is a two-sided process of *stories told* and *stories lived*.⁸ Stories told are tales we tell ourselves and others in order to make sense of the world around us and our place in it. CMM calls this process *coherence*, the making and managing of meaning. Stories lived are the ongoing patterns of interaction we enact as we seek to mesh our lives with others around us. CMM calls this effort *coordinating our actions together*. Pearce and Cronen labeled their theory *coordinated management of meaning* to encompass both types of stories.

Stories Told: Making and Managing Meaning

The stories we tell or hear are never as simple as they seem. Take, for example, the story that appeared in my inbox a month before my high school reunion. Decades earlier, the writer (Bea) and I had been in the same 7th and 8th grade class where we engaged in what I would describe as mild flirtation. Here's what I read:

I'm writing because I still think about the mystery of you not speaking to me all the way through high school. You may not even remember that you ignored me, but I do. What did I do to make you so angry? My mother always wondered if someone had said something to you about me that wasn't true. I just never knew. I would feel better if we could say "hello" at least at the gathering.

This seems to be a rather straightforward tale of a young girl who felt bad when a guy ignored her. If so, you might expect a *that-was-years-ago* reaction, a *get-a-life* response, or a quick click on *delete*. Pearce and Cronen suggest, however, that there's

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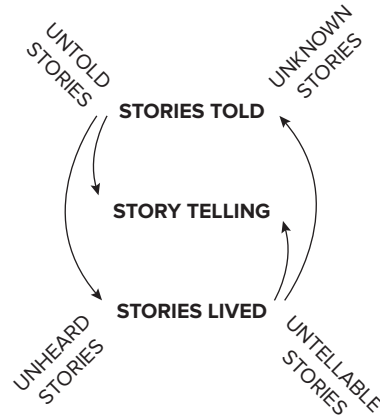


FIGURE 6-1 CMM's LUUUUTT Model

always much more to stories told that could enrich or alter their meaning. Emphasizing that CMM is a practical theory, they offer a number of analytical tools to help the listener consider alternative or additional interpretations. When I got this message from Bea, I used their LUUUUTT model pictured in Figure 6-1 to help me expand the story and possibly narrow the disparity between her account of me in the distant past and the stories each of us might want to live now.

LUUUUTT is an acronym to label the seven types of stories identified in the model.⁹ The focus of the model depicts the tension between our stories lived and our stories told. That tension can be increased or decreased by the manner in which the stories are presented. The four descriptions of nonobvious stories radiating toward the corners remind us there's always more to the situation that we aren't aware of. Barnett and Kim Pearce use the term *mystery* to cover everything relevant that is not, or cannot, be said. As I reread Bea's message, I tried to imagine what each of those seven interrelated stories in the LUUUUTT model might be.

1. Lived stories—*what we actually did or are doing*. I have no reason to doubt Bea's claim. Although I can't recall intentionally avoiding conversation with her in high school, neither do I have a mental image of us talking together, even though we were both cast members in the school play. In contrast, I know we chatted in junior high.
2. Unknown stories—*information that's missing*. Bea's mother suggested that I was turned off by lies I heard about her daughter. Not so. But the multiple possibilities that Bea imagined and couldn't discount would surely be distressing.
3. Untold stories—*what we choose not to say*. There was nothing in Bea's message about the attention I paid to her in junior high or anger she might have felt at the abrupt change in my behavior. Nor did she say anything about her current life.
4. Unheard stories—*what we say that isn't heard or acknowledged*. Did Bea try to reach out to me during those four years of silence and, if so, did I snub her? To ignore her email now would add insult to injury.
5. Untellable stories—*stories that are forbidden or too painful for us to tell*. It would be the height of arrogance on my part to think that I had the power to ruin Bea's life back then. Yet I did wonder what she couldn't say.
6. Story Telling—*the manner in which we communicate*. "Why" questions often impute blame, but the tone of Bea's message struck me as a mix of curiosity, sadness, courage, and an honest effort to clear the air before the class reunion.

7. **Stories Told—what we say we are doing.** With Bea’s permission, I’ve already cited the story she told in her email. The additional six stories the LUUUUTT model generated don’t negate what she expressed. As Kim Pearce explains,

The point of the LUUUUTT model is not to “find the correct story” or “the correct interpretation” as much as enlarging your awareness of how complex our social worlds are. The more aware we are of the complexity of our social worlds, the greater our capacity for holding frustrating situations and people more compassionately.¹⁰

I’ll revisit these stories told and my response to Bea when we examine the third claim of CMM.

Stories Lived: Coordinating Our Patterns of Interaction

There’s almost always a difference or tension between our stories told and stories lived. That’s because we can craft the stories we tell to be coherent and consistent, but the stories we live intersect with the actions and reactions of others. That makes them messy.

As communication scholars, Pearce and Cronen are particularly concerned with the patterns of communication we create with others. They offer the *serpentine model* shown in Figure 6-2 as a tool to capture what’s taking place between

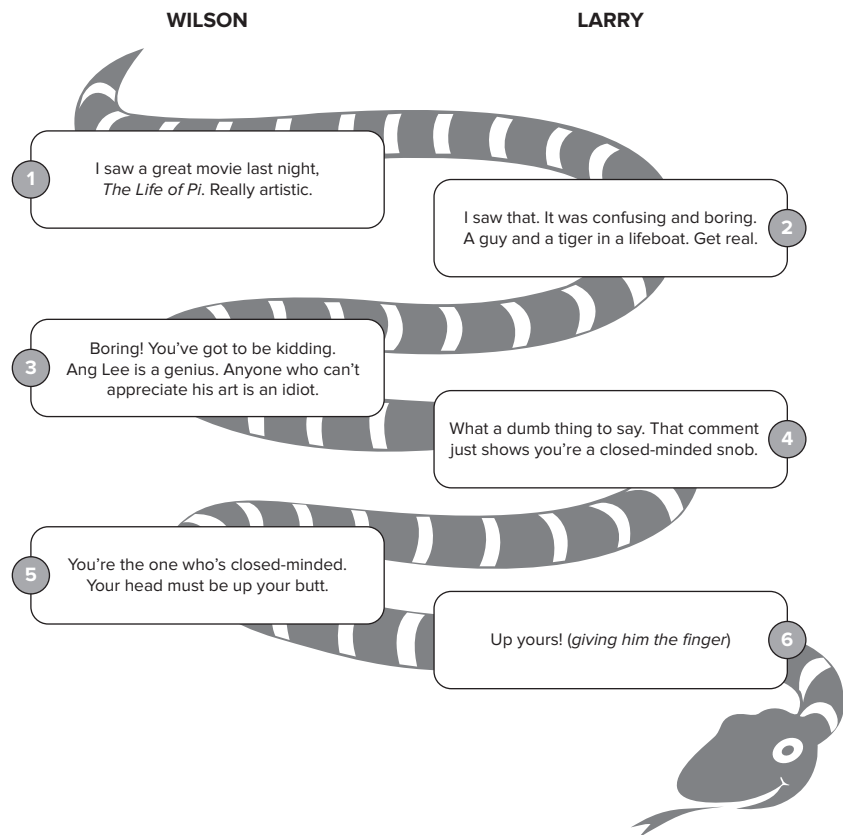


FIGURE 6-2 Serpentine Model of a Deteriorating Conversation

persons-in-conversation. Without such a tool, we may miss the repetitive patterns that either benefit or pollute the social environment. Pearce wrote that the model is called serpentine because it “looks like a snake crawling from one person or group to another and back again. This model directs our attention to the ‘back and forthness’ of social interaction. Every aspect of our social worlds is made by the collaborative action of multiple people.”¹¹ Note that the model almost seems to be a schematic drawing of Escher’s *Bond of Union*, which is utterly different from the standard one-way message transmission model of communication.

The serpentine model can analyze any conversation and map out its history. The conversation between Wilson and Larry has only six turns and clearly reveals the deterioration of their stories lived. Turns 1 and 2 show an honest difference of opinion, each stated vehemently. In turn 3, Wilson’s comment about the film director expands on his enthusiasm. But he also shows disdain for anyone who doesn’t agree with him, lumping Larry with a class of people who are mentally impaired. Larry then goes on the attack—no surprise. Note that in just four turns the guys have moved into an escalating pattern in which both are competing to see who can say the most hurtful things to the other. The original topic of conversation has become irrelevant. Trapped in a sense of oughtness that has them in its grip, they can continue this feud forever, fueled only by the logical force of the interaction.

Logical force is the moral pressure or sense of obligation a person feels to respond in a given way. After just being labeled an aesthetic dolt, Larry feels he has no choice but to lash out at Wilson. When in other conversations, the situational constraints or perceived threats to his values or self-image may also trigger an automatic response. In addition, there might be times when he’s convinced there’s only one thing to say in order to get what he wants in the future. But whatever the cause of logical force, when Larry or any of us are under its sway, we’re convinced we could do no other.¹² If we recognize what’s happening in this pattern of communication, CMM suggests we can choose to change it.

CMM describes Wilson and Larry’s conversational sequence as an *unwanted repetitive pattern (URP)*.¹³ It’s likely that neither party wants it, yet both seem compelled to relive it over and over. Those who’ve seen Bill Murray’s classic film *Groundhog Day* will appreciate the irony. And all Americans have seen this URP reenacted in the reciprocated diatribe between Republicans and Democrats.¹⁴ Yet Pearce and Cronen maintained that it’s possible for people to align their stories lived without agreeing on the meaning of their stories told. That’s the coordination part of CMM.

According to Barnett Pearce, *coordination* refers to the “process by which persons collaborate in an attempt to bring into being their vision of what is necessary, noble, and good, and to preclude the enactment of what they fear, hate, or despise.”¹⁵ This intentional alignment of stories lived doesn’t require people to reach agreement on the meaning of their joint action. They can decide to coordinate their behavior without sharing a common interpretation of the event. For example, conservative activists and staunch feminists could temporarily join forces to protest the public showing of a hardcore pornographic movie. Although they have discrepant views of social justice and different reasons for condemning the film, they might agree on a unified course of action.

Pearce used the phrase *coordination without coherence* to refer to people cooperating for quite different reasons. Sarah’s application log for CMM provides a striking example:

Logical force

The moral pressure or sense of obligation a person feels to respond in a given way—“I had no choice.”

Coordination

People collaborating in an attempt to bring into being their vision of what is necessary, noble, and good, and to preclude the enactment of what they fear, hate, or despise.

CMM suggests that people may synchronize their actions even if they don't share the other's motives. This was the case with my core group of friends in high school. Our group consisted of Colin—a gay atheist, Stephany—a nonpracticing Jewish girl, Aliza—a devout Jewish girl, and me—a Christian. We all abstained from drinking, drugs, and sex, but the reasons for our behavior were extremely different.

THIRD CLAIM: WE GET WHAT WE MAKE

Since CMM claims we create our social worlds through our patterns of communication, it follows that we get what we make. Kim Pearce explains, "If your patterns of interaction contain destructive accusations and reactive anger, you will most likely make a defensive relationship; if your patterns contain genuine questions and curiosity, you will have a better chance of making a more open relationship."¹⁶

In the last major article he wrote before his death, Barnett Pearce urged that we ask three questions when we reflect on past interactions, are in the midst of a current conversation, or contemplate what we might say in the future:¹⁷

How did that get made?

What are we making?

What can we do to make better social worlds?

These questions motivated me to do the LUUUUTT analysis of Bea's email that I outlined in the "Stories Told" section. The *How did that get made?* question is easy to figure out, although I don't like the answer. Bea's angst seemed to be the product of my total disregard over a four-year period. My behavior may not have been the sole cause of the confusion and hurt she felt, but after reading the story she told I wished I had lived a story back then that created something positive.

The second question was more pressing. What were Bea and I making through the pattern of our email exchange? You've already read Bea's query and request expressed below in turn 3. But CMM theorists believe you can only come to understand what we were creating by looking at the twists and turns of the whole serpentine flow.

A Digital Conversation Between Bea and Em

- #1 BEA: Hi Emory. Are you the Emory Griffin that went to Morgan Park High School? If so, I saw your name on the list as coming to the reunion.
- #2 EM: Hi Bea. That's me. I look forward to seeing you and everyone else next month.
- #3 BEA: I'm writing because I still think about the mystery of you not speaking to me all the way through high school. You may not even remember that you ignored me, but I do. What did I do to make you so angry? My mother always wondered if someone had said something to you about me that wasn't true. I just never knew. I would feel better if we could say "hello" at least at the gathering.
- #4 EM: Wow, I am so sorry. Please forgive me for this hurtful behavior, and even more so that I'm not even conscious that I didn't speak. Thank you for having the courage to raise the issue. I feel bad that on the basis of my stupid behavior, for decades you've thought there was something wrong with you. Obviously the

problem was in me. Was I too conceited, insecure, insensitive, or oblivious? Probably all of the above.

No, you didn't say or do anything to make me angry and I never heard anything derogatory about you from others. So why didn't I talk to you? I honestly don't know. And I feel bad that I wasn't approachable enough that you could say something back then. ("Excuse me, Em. Why aren't you talking to me?") Not likely I guess. I'd like to spend some time together at the reunion catching up, if you're willing. But I'd understand if "Hello" is all you want. Again, thanks so much for writing.

#5 BEA: Was that ever nice! I've been doing computer stuff all day and receiving your email was the best part. Thanks for your response, it felt so good. Yes, I'll enjoy catching up at the reunion. What is it that you teach?

#6 EM: You'll laugh! I teach communication. I'm even supposed to be an expert.

An additional four turns set up where and when we'd meet at the reunion. We ate dinner together with other friends at the table and swapped stories and pictures. That night our stories told and our stories lived seemed to align well. I had the rest of the night and breakfast in the morning to enjoy the company of old friends.

A CMM Interpretation

Turns 1 and 2 are noteworthy for their guarded tone. Bea is checking to see if I'm the right guy—a reasonable caution because it was only in high school that friends started to call me Em. I respond that it's me, but my "looking forward" statement covers all who come to the party. I've expressed no special encouragement or excitement to Bea. If the pattern continued in that noncommittal tone, Barnett Pearce would have called it a "dead snake."

Bea then shares her bewilderment, desire for online clarity, and request for face-to-face civility at the reunion. Given my lack of responsiveness throughout high school, it struck me as a gutsy move. After reading this message I sat back and mulled over how I wanted to respond. This is when I did the LUUUUTT analysis described earlier. We were at the crucial place in our email exchange that Barnett and Kim Pearce call a *bifurcation point*. They said it's the turn "in a conversation where what happens next will affect the unfolding pattern of interaction and take it in a different direction."¹⁸

I was at a fork in the road. I could deny that I had ignored Bea, stonewall her query, or casually reply that I would "of course say hello" when we met. That kind of response would likely have created more tension, hurt, anger, guilt, fear, and all the other yucky stuff that pollutes the social environment. And for sure it would take away any desire to attend the class reunion. Instead, I chose the route shown in turn 4. As Bea's and my comments in turns 5 and 6 reveal, we created a social world more to our liking—one that may have even benefited others at the reunion.

I was fortunate that Bea raised these issues through email rather than confronting me with the same words face-to-face at the reunion. The time lag possible in computer-mediated communication offered me an opportunity to do the LUUUUTT analysis, which got me in touch with the depth and complexity of the story Bea told. That gap gave me a chance to craft what I hoped would be a thoughtful and caring response. The privacy also made it possible for me to convey my apology without a bunch of onlookers weighing in or taking sides. But it was Barnett Pearce's hope that every student majoring in communication would become adept at spotting

Bifurcation point

A critical point in a conversation where what one says next will affect the unfolding pattern of interaction and potentially take it in a different direction.

the bifurcation points in the midst of tough discussions and have the desire and skill to craft a response on the fly that would make better social worlds. If the current crop of more than 200,000 undergraduate communication majors developed that mindset and ability, he was convinced we could make a radically different social world.¹⁹

FOURTH CLAIM: GET THE PATTERN RIGHT, CREATE BETTER SOCIAL WORLDS

CMM advocates—people who take a communication perspective—see this fourth claim as an accurate and reassuring prediction. But they also regard the statement as a prescription—that we have an obligation or moral responsibility to use CMM insights and models to create the best social worlds possible.

What do these best social worlds look like? Barnett Pearce admitted he couldn't be specific because each situation is different. He also feared that those who have a precise image of what the ideal social world should be will try to compel others to live within their vision and end up making things worse.²⁰ But throughout their most recent publications on CMM, Barnett and Kim Pearce describe better social worlds as replete with *caring, compassion, love, and grace* among its inhabitants—not the stated goal of most communication theories.²¹ And Kim Pearce stresses that these are not just internal emotional experiences. Rather, they are “a way of being with others that makes a space for something new to emerge.”²²

This interpersonal goal of CMM raises a serious question for students of communication. What characteristics or abilities does it take for a person to create conversational patterns that will change the social world for the better? The theorists' answer is that one does not need to be a saint, a genius, or an orator. The communicator, however, must be *mindful*.²³

Mindfulness

The presence or awareness of what participants are making in the midst of their own conversation.

Mindfulness is a presence or awareness of what participants are making in the midst of their conversation. It's paying less attention to what they are talking about and focusing on what they are *doing* and *becoming*. Mindful participants don't speak on mental automatic pilot or cognitive cruise control. They are participant observers willing to step back and look for places in the conversational flow where they can say or do something that will make the situation better for everyone involved. For example, are you willing and able to be mindful when

- ... talking to your roommate about the mess in your apartment?
- ... responding to your mom's phone plea to spend spring break at home?
- ... listening to your teammates complain about the coach?
- ... replying to a sarcastic comment on Facebook?
- ... dealing with a demanding customer at your minimum-wage McJob?
- ... fending off unwelcome advances during a Friday night pub crawl?

To the extent that your answer is *yes*, CMM claims you have the capacity to make better social worlds.

Once the mindful communicator spots a bifurcation point in a pattern of communication that's deteriorating, what should he or she say? Barnett Pearce found it helpful to respond to challenging or boorish statements with phrases that showed curiosity rather than offense.²⁴ *Tell me more about that. What else was going on at the time? What experiences have led you to that position? Why don't people understand?* Those familiar with Hebrew wisdom literature will recognize the parallel with Proverbs 15:1, “A gentle answer turns away wrath.”

Even a single word like *yes* can change the direction of the conversational pattern. In her autobiography, *Bossypants*, actress, comedian, writer, and producer Tina Fey offers “The Rules of Improvisation That Will Change Your Life . . .”

The first rule of improvisation is AGREE. Always agree and SAY YES. When you’re improvising, this means you are required to agree with whatever your partner has created. So if we’re improvising and I say, “Freeze, I have a gun,” and you say, “That’s not a gun. It’s your finger. You’re pointing your finger at me,” our improvised scene has ground to a halt. But if I say, “Freeze, I have a gun!” and you say, “The gun I gave you for Christmas. You bastard!” then we have started a scene because we have AGREED that my finger is in fact a Christmas gun.

Now, obviously in real life you’re not always going to agree with everything everyone says. But the Rule of Agreement reminds you to respect what your partner has created and to at least start from an open-minded place. Start with a YES and see where it takes you.

As an improviser, I always find it jarring when I meet someone in real life whose first answer is no. “No we can’t do that.” “No that’s not in the budget . . .” What kind of way is that to live?²⁵

For an overall remedy to unsatisfactory or destructive patterns of interaction, CMM theorists advocate *dialogue*, a specific form of communication that they believe will create a social world where we can live with dignity, honor, joy, and love.²⁶ Although the term is used in multiple ways within our discipline, Barnett and Kim Pearce have adopted the perspective of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber.

For Buber, dialogue “involves remaining in the tension between holding our own perspective while being profoundly open to the other.”²⁷ This of course takes “courage because it means giving up a person-position of clarity, certainty, or moral/intellectual superiority.”²⁸ We might actually learn something new that will change what we think, or even who we are.²⁹ The following ethical reflection expands on Buber’s concept of dialogue.

Dialogic communication

Conversation in which parties remain in the tension between holding their own perspective while being profoundly open to the other.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: MARTIN BUBER’S DIALOGIC ETHICS

Martin Buber was a German Jewish philosopher and theologian who immigrated to Palestine before World War II and died in 1965. His ethical approach focuses on relationships between people rather than on moral codes of conduct. “In the beginning is the relation,” Buber wrote. “The relation is the cradle of actual life.”³⁰

Buber contrasted two types of relationships—*I-It* versus *I-Thou*. In an *I-It* relationship we treat the other person as a thing to be used, an object to be manipulated. Created by monologue, an *I-It* relationship lacks mutuality. Parties come together as individuals intent on creating only an impression. Deceit is a way to maintain appearances.

In an *I-Thou* relationship we regard our partner as the very one we are. We see the other as created in the image of God and resolve to treat him or her as a valued end rather than a means to our own end. This implies that we will seek to experience the relationship as it appears to the other person. Buber said we can do this only through dialogue.

For Buber, *dialogue* was a synonym for ethical communication. Dialogue is mutuality in conversation that creates the *Between*, through which we help each other to be more human. Dialogue is not only a morally appropriate act, but it is also a way

Narrow ridge

A metaphor of I-Thou living in the dialogic tension between ethical relativism and rigid absolutism.

to discover what is ethical in our relationship. It thus requires self-disclosure to, confirmation of, and vulnerability with the other person.

Buber used the image of the *narrow ridge* to illustrate the tension of dialogic living. On one side of the moral path is the gulf of relativism, where there are no standards. On the other side is the plateau of absolutism, where rules are etched in stone:

On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of the Between.³¹

Duquesne University communication ethicist Ron Arnett notes that “living the narrow-ridge philosophy requires a life of personal and interpersonal concern, which is likely to generate a more complicated existence than that of the egoist or the selfless martyr.”³² Despite that tension, many interpersonal theorists and practitioners have carved out ethical positions similar to Buber’s philosophy. Consistent with CMM’s foundational belief that persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities, Barnett and Kim Pearce are attracted to Buber’s core belief that dialogue is a joint achievement that cannot be produced on demand, but occurs among people who seek it and are prepared for it.

CRITIQUE: HIGHLY PRACTICAL AS IT MOVES FROM CONFUSION TO CLARITY

Because CMM is an interpretive theory, I’ll apply the six criteria suggested in Chapter 3 as I did when evaluating Mead’s theory of *symbolic interactionism* in the previous chapter.

New understanding of people. By offering such diagnostic tools as the serpentine and LUUUUTT models of communication, CMM promotes a deeper *understanding of people* and of the social worlds they create through their conversation. Those models are just two of the tools the theorists offer. Students who want to have a greater understanding of the “making” of social worlds will find the daisy model, the hierarchical model, unwanted repetitive patterns, and strange loops equally helpful.

Clarification of values. Unlike many theories which seek only to describe communication patterns, CMM theorists and the researchers they inspire make it clear that their aim is to make better social worlds. Barnett and Kim Pearce promote values of curiosity, caring, compassion, mindfulness, gratitude, grace, and love. They have invited us to join them in an ongoing effort to enact these qualities in our stories told and stories lived. Some objective theorists may personally share these values, but believe a communication theory holding out the promise of making *better social worlds* should describe that goal in terms of specific behaviors and outcomes.

Community of agreement. Although many objective theorists dismiss CMM because of its social constructionist assumptions, CMM has generated widespread interest and *acceptance within the community* of interpretive communication scholars. For example, when Robert Craig proposed that a pragmatic tradition be added to his original list of seven traditions of communication theory (see Chapter 4), he cited CMM as the exemplar of a practical theory.³³

Reform of society. If changing destructive patterns of communication in whole communities strikes you as a bit of a stretch, you should know that pursuit of this goal

is why Barnett and Kim Pearce founded the Public Dialogue Consortium and the CMM Institute.³⁴ (Visit www.cmmstitute.net for updates, research, and applications.) Not only have many associates signed on to the cause, but they've also demonstrated that a dialogic form of communication is "learnable, teachable, and contagious."³⁵

Qualitative research. CMM scholars and practitioners use a wide range of qualitative research methods—textual and narrative analyses, case studies, interviews, participant observation, ethnography, and collaborative action research.³⁶ It's not clear that this research has spawned new theoretical development,³⁷ but these studies have definitely helped practitioners apply CMM models of communication in novel ways.

Aesthetic appeal. Despite meeting the previous five criteria with ease, lack of clarity has seriously limited CMM's wider use. The theory has a reputation of being a confusing mix of ideas that are hard to pin down because they're expressed in convoluted language. In 2001, when Barnett Pearce asked those who use CMM in their teaching, training, counseling, and consulting what changes or additions they thought should be made to the theory, the most frequent plea was for user-friendly explanations expressed in easy-to-understand terms. The following story from the field underscores why this call for clarity is so crucial:

My counseling trainees often find CMM ideas exciting, but its language daunting or too full of jargon. Some trainees connect with the ideas but most feel intimidated by the language and the concepts—diminished in some way or excluded! One trainee sat in a posture of physically cringing because she did not understand. This was a competent woman who had successfully completed counselor training three years ago and was doing a "refresher" with us. I don't think she found it too refreshing at that moment. CMM ideas would be more useful if they were available in everyday language—perhaps via examples and storytelling.³⁸

I've tried to heed this advice while writing about CMM. Hopefully, you haven't cringed. But in order to reduce the wince factor, I've had to leave out many of the valued terms, tools, and models that are the working vocabulary of this complex theory. I've been guided by Kim Pearce's new book, *Compassionate Communicating Because Moments Matter*, where she lays out the essentials of CMM in the way the advocate requested.³⁹ This little volume, which is my recommended resource, is a clear statement of CMM's four core claims. In user-friendly language, Kim illustrates them with stories from her work and life together with her husband, Barnett. CMM's aesthetic appeal is on the rise.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. *Social constructionists* see themselves as curious participants in a pluralistic world. Are you willing to live with uncertainty, abandon a detached perspective, and not insist on a singular view of Truth so that you can join them?
2. Can you provide a rationale for placing this chapter on CMM immediately after the chapter on *symbolic interactionism*?
3. CMM suggests that we can take part in joint action without a common understanding—*coordination* without a shared *coherence*. Can you think of examples from your own life?

4. Can you recall an important conversation in which you may have helped create a better social world? Were you *mindful* of what you were making, and did you spot a *bifurcation point* where you could change the *pattern of conversation*?

CONVERSATIONS



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A SECOND LOOK

As you watch my conversation with Barnett Pearce, you might think of us as the persons-in-conversation pictured in Escher's *Bond of Union*. What kind of social world do you see us creating as we talk? I like to think that our conversation displays a few examples of dialogic communication. If so, was Pearce right in thinking you'll find this kind of talk contagious? At one point I repeat my "Questions to Sharpen Your Focus" query about how social constructionists must give up claims of certainty, objectivity, and Truth. I then ask if that's a fair question. See if you agree with Pearce's response and the reason he gives.

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To access scenes from feature films that illustrate
CMM and other theories, click on Suggested
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