CHAPTER 5

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Symbolic Interactionism

of George Herbert Mead

George Herbert Mead was an early *social constructionist*. Mead believed that our thoughts, self-concept, and the wider community we live in are created through communication—symbolic interaction. The book that lays out his theory, *Mind, Self, and Society,* describes how language is essential for these three critical human characteristics to develop.[1] Without symbolic interaction, humanity as we know it wouldn't exist.

Symbolic interaction isn't just talk. The term refers to the language and gestures a person uses in anticipation of the way others will respond. The verbal and nonverbal responses that a listener then provides are likewise crafted in expectation of how the original speaker will react. The continuing process is like the game of charades described in the introduction to this section; it's a full-fledged conversation.

Symbolic interaction
The ongoing use of language and gestures in anticipation of how the other will react; a conversation.

Mead was a philosophy professor at the University of Chicago for the first three decades of the twentieth century. As a close personal friend of renowned pragmatist John Dewey, he shared Dewey's applied approach to knowledge. Mead thought that the true test of any theory is whether it is useful in solving complex social problems. If it doesn't work in practice, forget it! He was a social activist who marched for women's suffrage, championed labor unions in an era of robber-baron capitalism, and helped launch the urban settlement house movement with pioneer social worker Jane Addams.

Although Mead taught in a philosophy department, he is best known by sociologists as the teacher who trained a generation of the best minds in their field. Strangely, he never set forth his wide-ranging ideas in a book or systematic treatise. After he died in 1931, his students pulled together class notes and conversations with their mentor and published *Mind, Self, and Society* in his name. It was only then that his chief disciple, Herbert Blumer at the University of California, Berkeley, coined the term *symbolic interactionism.* This phrase captures what Mead claimed is the most human and humanizing activity that people can engage in—talking to each other. This claim provides the backdrop for the movie *Nell.*

Jodie Foster received a best actress Oscar nomination for her 1994 portrayal of a backwoods, Appalachian young woman raised in almost total isolation. The film, *Nell,* covers a three-month period of the woman's life immediately

following the death of her mother.[2] Nell is discovered by Jerry Lovell, a small-town doctor who is quickly joined by Paula Olsen, a psychologist from a big-city university medical center. Both are appalled and fascinated by this grown-up "wild child" who cowers in terror and makes incomprehensible sounds.

Nell is based on the play *Idioglossia,* a Greek term meaning a personal or private language. As Jerry and Paula come to realize, Nell's speech is not gibberish. Her language is based on the King James Version of the Bible, which her mother read to her out loud for more than 20 years. Yet because the mother had suffered a stroke that left one side of her face paralyzed, the words Nell learned were unintelligible to anyone else.

Early in the film Paula labels Nell "autistic" and tries to have her committed to a psych ward for observation. Jerry, on the other hand, treats Nell as a frightened human being and tries to get to know her by learning her language. Although fiction, the movie is an intriguing story about the civilizing influence of language. As such, it could easily have been scripted by a symbolic interactionist. I'll describe scenes from the film to illustrate the key ideas of George Herbert Mead, his student Herbert Blumer, and others who adopt an interactionist approach. The film illustrates Mead's theory so well that you might find it fascinating to watch the whole movie. You can rent *Nell* through Netflix, your local video store, or purchase it at *www.moviesunlimited.com* for less than the cost of a ticket at a multiscreen theater.

Blumer stated three core principles of symbolic interactionism that deal with *meaning, language,* and *thinking*.[3] These premises lead to conclusions about the creation of a person's *self* and socialization into the larger *society.* The rest of this chapter discusses these five related topics one by one. As you will see, all of these themes are prominent in the story of Nell.

MEANING: THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REALITY

Blumer starts with the premise that *humans act toward people or things on the basis of the meanings they assign to those people or things.* It's our interpretation that counts. The viewer of *Nell* can see this principle played out in the radically different responses that Jodie Foster's character elicits from the people she meets. The county sheriff regards Nell as crazy and suggests she be put in a padded cell. His chronically depressed wife sees Nell as a free spirit and joins her in a lighthearted game of patty-cake. The chief psychiatrist at the medical center views this child-of-the-wild case as a chance to make research history and insists the patient be brought to the center for study. And because a group of sleazy guys in a pool hall are convinced that Nell will mindlessly mimic any action she sees, they approach her as easy sexual prey. As for the doctor who found her, Jerry assumes Nell is fully human and seeks to become her friend. She in turn calls Jerry her guardian angel.

Which of these interpretations is correct? Who is the *real* Nell? From Mead's pragmatic standpoint, the answer doesn't make much difference. Once people define a situation as real, it's very real in its consequences.[4] And with the possible exception of Jerry, all of the people in the story initially regard Nell as totally other than themselves—an oddity to be explored or exploited.

In Jane Wagner's one-woman play *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe,* Trudy the bag lady views society from her perspective on the street.

Her words underscore the interactionist position that meaning-making is a community project:

> It's my belief we all, at one time or another,
> secretly ask ourselves the question,
> "Am *I* crazy?"
> In my case, the answer came back: A resounding
> YES!
>
> You're thinkin': How does a person know if they're crazy or not? Well, sometimes you don't know. Sometimes you can go through life suspecting you *are* but never really knowing for sure. Sometimes you know for sure 'cause you got so many people tellin' you you're crazy that it's your word against everyone else's. . . .
>
> After all, what is reality anyway? Nothin' but a collective hunch.[5]

What causes people to react this way toward Trudy or Nell? For followers of Mead that's a loaded question, one that reflects the stimulus–response thinking of behavioral scientists. Interactionists are united in their disdain for deterministic thinking. The closest they come to the idea of causality is to argue that humans act on their definition of the situation.[6] An interactionist revision of the way scientists diagram stimulus–response causality might look like this:

Stimulus → Interpretation → Response

The middle term in the chain shows that it's the meaning that matters. As Trudy notes, however, when those interpretations are shared throughout society, they become hard to resist.

LANGUAGE: THE SOURCE OF MEANING

Blumer's second premise is that *meaning arises out of the social interaction that people have with each other.* In other words, meaning is not inherent in objects; it's not pre-existent in a state of nature. Meaning is negotiated through the use of *language*—hence the term *symbolic interactionism.*

As human beings, we have the ability to name things. We can designate a specific object *(person),* identify an action *(scream),* or refer to an abstract idea *(crazy).* Occasionally a word sounds like the thing it describes *(smack, thud, crash),* but usually the names we use have no logical connection with the object at hand. Symbols are arbitrary signs. There's nothing inherently small, soft, or lovable in the word *kitten.*[7] It's only by talking with others—symbolic interaction—that we come to ascribe that meaning and develop a universe of discourse.

Mead believed that symbolic naming is the basis for human society. The book of Genesis in the Bible states that Adam's first task was to name the animals—the dawn of civilization.

Interactionists claim that the extent of knowing is dependent on the extent of naming. Although language can be a prison that confines us, we have the potential to push back the walls and bars as we master more words. From your experience taking the SAT or ACT college entrance exams, you probably recall a major focus on linguistic aptitude. The construction of the test obviously reflects agreement with the interactionist claim that human intelligence is the ability to symbolically identify much of what we encounter. When Paula

realizes the extent of Nell's personal vocabulary, she can no longer treat Nell as incompetent or ignorant.

But symbolic interaction is not just a means for intelligent expression; it's also the way we learn to interpret the world. A symbol is "a stimulus that has a learned meaning and value for people."[8] Consider the puzzle posed by the following story:

> A father and his son were driving to a ball game when their car stalled on the railroad tracks. In the distance a train whistle blew a warning. Frantically, the father tried to start the engine, but in his panic, he couldn't turn the key, and the car was hit by the onrushing train. An ambulance sped to the scene and picked them up. On the way to the hospital, the father died. The son was still alive but his condition was very serious, and he needed immediate surgery. The moment they arrived at the hospital, he was wheeled into an emergency operating room, and the surgeon came in, expecting a routine case. However, on seeing the boy the surgeon blanched and muttered, "I can't operate on this boy—he's my son."[9]

How can this be? How do you explain the surgeon's dilemma? If the answer isn't immediately obvious, I encourage you to close the book and think it through.

This puzzle is the opening paragraph of an article that appears in a fascinating book of readings that is my Second Look resource for applications of symbolic interactionism. Douglas Hofstadter, the man who poses the problem, is adamant that readers think it through until they figure out the answer. There's no doubt, he assures us, that we'll know it when we get it.

I first heard this puzzle in a slightly different form about a decade ago. I'm ashamed to admit that it took me a few minutes to figure out the answer. My chagrin is heightened by the fact that my doctor is the wife of a departmental colleague and my daughter-in-law is a physician as well. How could I have been taken in?

Hofstadter's answer to my question is that the words we use have *default assumptions.* Since the story contains no reference to the doctor's gender, and the majority of physicians in America are men, we'll likely assume that the surgeon in the story is male. While such an assumption may have some basis in fact, the subtle tyranny of symbols is that we usually don't consciously think about the mental jump we're making. Unless we're brought up short by some obvious glitch in our taken-for-granted logic, we'll probably conjure up a male figure every time we read or hear the word *surgeon.* What's more, we'll probably assume that the way we think things are is the way they ought to be. That's how most of the "normal" people in *Nell* operated. They labeled Nell *strange, weird,* or *deviant*—assuming that those who are different are also demented.

Significant symbols can of course be nonverbal as well as linguistic. When I asked my students to apply a feature of symbolic interaction to their own experience, Glynka wrote the following:

> A ring. A class ring. A guy's class ring. In high school it was the ultimate symbol of status, whether dangling from a chain or wrapped with a quarter inch of yarn. Without ever speaking a word, a girl could tell everybody that she was loved (and trusted with expensive jewelry), that she had a protector (and how big that protector was, based, of course, on ring size—the bigger the better), the guy's status (preferably senior), and his varsity sport (preferably football). Yes, if you had the (right) class ring, you were really somebody.

She then noted it was only through hundreds of conversations among students at her school that the privileges and responsibilities that went with wearing the ring became something "everyone knows." Without symbolic interaction, there's no shared meaning.

THINKING: THE PROCESS OF TAKING THE ROLE OF THE OTHER

Blumer's third premise is that *an individual's interpretation of symbols is modified by his or her own thought processes.* Symbolic interactionists describe thinking as an inner conversation. Mead called this inner dialogue *minding.*

Minding is the pause that's reflective. It's the two-second delay while we mentally rehearse our next move, test alternatives, anticipate others' reactions. Mead says we don't need any encouragement to look before we leap. We naturally talk to ourselves in order to sort out the meaning of a difficult situation. But first, we need language. Before we can think, we must be able to interact symbolically.

Minding
An inner dialogue used to test alternatives, rehearse actions, and anticipate reactions before responding; self-talk.

The Lion King, Finding Nemo, and *Dr. Dolittle* movies aside, Mead believed that animals act "instinctively" and "without deliberation."[10] They are unable to think reflectively because, with few exceptions, they are unable to communicate symbolically. The human animal comes equipped with a brain that is wired for thought. But that alone is not sufficient for thinking. Interactionists maintain that "humans require social stimulation and exposure to abstract symbol systems to embark upon conceptual thought processes that characterize our species."[11] Language is the software that activates the mind, but it doesn't come pre-installed.

Throughout the first half of *Nell,* Jerry and Paula are hard-pressed to explain Nell's ability to reflect rather than merely react. They understand that Nell interacted with her mother but are puzzled as to how communication with a single reclusive and taciturn adult would offer the social stimulation that learning a language requires.[12] According to interactionist principles, there's no way that a person who has had almost zero human contact would be able to develop a language or think through her responses. Yet through cinematic flashbacks, viewers learn that Nell had a twin sister, who was her constant companion during her early childhood development. Until her sister died, Nell's life was rich in social stimulation, twin-speak, and shared meaning. As her past comes to light, Jerry and Paula gain an understanding of Nell's capacity to think. Symbolic interaction has activated cognitive processes that, once switched on, won't shut down.

Mead's greatest contribution to our understanding of the way we think is his notion that human beings have the unique capacity to *take the role of the other.* Early in life, kids role-play the activities of their parents, talk with imaginary friends, and take constant delight in pretending to be someone else. As adults, we continue to put ourselves in the place of others and act as they would act, although the process may be less conscious. Mead was convinced that thinking is the mental conversation we hold with others, always with an eye toward how they might see us and react to what we might do.

Taking the role of the other
The process of mentally imagining that you are someone else who is viewing you.

In Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird,* Scout stands on Boo Radley's porch and recalls her father's words, "You never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them."[13] That's a clear statement of what symbolic interactionism means by role-taking. The young, impulsive girl takes the perspective of a painfully shy, emotionally fragile man. Note that she doesn't

become him—that would be *Invasion of the Body Snatchers.* She does, however, look out at the world through his eyes. More than anything else, what she sees is herself.

THE SELF: REFLECTIONS IN A LOOKING GLASS

Once we understand that *meaning*, *language*, and *thinking* are tightly interconnected, we're able to grasp Mead's concept of the *self.* Mead dismissed the idea that we could get glimpses of who we are through introspection. He claimed, instead, that we paint our self-portrait with brush strokes that come from *taking the role of the other*—imagining how we look to another person. Interactionists call this mental image the *looking-glass self* and insist that it's socially constructed. Mead borrowed the phrase from sociologist Charles Cooley, who adapted it from a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson wrote that each close companion . . .

Looking-glass self
The mental self-image that results from taking the role of the other; the objective self; me.

> Is to his friend a looking-glass
> Reflects his figure that doth pass.[14]

Stated more formally, the Mead–Cooley hypothesis claims that "individuals' self-conceptions result from assimilating the judgments of significant others."[15]

Symbolic interactionists are convinced that the self is a function of language. Without talk there would be no self-concept. "We are not born with senses of self. Rather, selves arise in interaction with others. I can only experience myself in relation to others; absent interaction with others, I cannot be a self—I cannot emerge as someone."[16] To the extent that we interact with new acquaintances or have novel conversations with significant others, the self is always in flux. This means that there is no etched-in-stone Em inside my body waiting to be discovered or set free. We can only imagine the wrenching change in self-concept that a real-life Nell would experience when thrust into interviews with psychologists, reporters, and lawyers.

According to Mead, the self is an ongoing process combining the "I" and the "me." The "I" is the spontaneous, driving force that fosters all that is novel, unpredictable, and unorganized in the self. For those of you intrigued with brain hemisphere research, the "I" is akin to right-brain creativity. Nell's dancelike movements that simulated trees blowing in the wind sprang from the "I" part of self. So did Jerry's spur-of-the-moment musical accompaniment. (Surely if he'd thought about it ahead of time, he'd have selected a song other than Willie Nelson's "Crazy.") When Paula goes ballistic over his lack of professionalism, he can only respond that sometimes people do things on impulse. Like Jerry, we know little about the "I" because it's forever elusive. Trying to examine the "I" part of the self is like viewing a snowflake through a lighted microscope. The very act causes it to vanish. Put another way, you can never know your "I," because once it is known it becomes your "me."[17]

I
The subjective self; the spontaneous driving force that fosters all that is novel, unpredictable, and unorganized in the self.

The "me" is viewed as an object—the image of self seen in the looking glass of other people's reactions. Do you remember in grammar school how you learned to identify the personal pronoun *me* in a sentence as the *object* of a verb? Because of the role-taking capacity of the human race, we can stand outside our bodies and view ourselves as objects. This reflexive experience is like having the Goodyear blimp hover overhead, sending back video images of ourselves while we act. Mead described the process this way: "If the 'I' speaks, the 'me' hears."[18] And "the 'I' of this moment is present in the 'me' of the next moment."[19]

Me
The objective self; the image of self seen when one takes the role of the other.

An early turning point in the film comes when Jerry enters Nell's cabin. She runs to a wardrobe mirror and reaches out to her reflected image and says, "May," a word Jerry understands to mean "me." She then pulls back and hugs herself while saying, "Tay," a word he interprets as "I." In the next scene, therapists viewing Paula's videotape of the sequence are impressed by this perfect case of Nell seeing her objective self as distinct from her subjective self. As a result of her actions, they have little doubt about Nell's humanity and sanity. She has an intact self.[20]

SOCIETY: THE SOCIALIZING EFFECT OF OTHERS' EXPECTATIONS

If Nell's only human contact were with her mother, her twin sister, and Jerry, her "me" would be formed by the reflected views of just those three significant others. But once she leaves her remote mountain cabin, Nell plunges into a community of other people. In order to survive and thrive within that society, Nell needs to figure out what they are doing, what their actions mean, and what they

expect of her. Mead and other symbolic interactionists refer to the composite mental image she puts together as her *generalized other.*

> The generalized other is an organized set of information that the individual carries in her or his head about what the general expectation and attitudes of the social group are. We refer to this generalized other whenever we try to figure out how to behave or how to evaluate our behavior in a social situation. We take the position of the generalized other and assign meaning to ourselves and our actions.[21]

Generalized other
The composite mental image a person has of his or her self based on societal expectations and responses.

Unlike most sociologists, Mead saw society as consisting of individual actors who make their own choices—society-in-the-making rather than society-by-previous-design.[22] Yet these individuals align their actions with what others are doing to form health care systems, legal systems, economic systems, and all the other societal institutions that Nell soon encounters. It is unclear from *Mind, Self, and Society* whether Mead regarded the *generalized other* as (1) an overarching looking-glass self that we put together from the reflections we see in everyone we know or (2) the institutional expectations, rules of the game, or accepted practices within society that influence every conversation that takes place in people's minds. Either way, the generalized other shapes how we think and interact within the community.

To summarize, there is no "me" at birth. The "me" is formed only through continual symbolic interaction—first with family, next with playmates, then in institutions such as schools. As the generalized other develops, this imaginary composite person becomes the conversational partner in an ongoing mental dialogue. In this way, kids participate in their own socialization. The child gradually acquires the roles of those in the surrounding community. Mead would have us think of the "me" as the organized society within the individual.

Although *Nell* consistently portrays Mead's interactionist concepts, there's one discordant note at the end of the film. The final scene shows Nell five years later with the people she first met. Nell has obviously changed their lives. For example, Jerry and Paula are now married and have a daughter, who reminds the viewer of Nell as a child. The sheriff's wife is no longer depressed, and she attributes her transformation to Nell. Despite the fact that Nell has been thrust into a wider world of lawyers, reporters, and salesclerks who label her behavior as deviant and insist that she conform to societal roles, she seems strangely unaffected by their judgment or expectations. The character that Jodie Foster plays radiates an inner peace and contentment. The community in the form of her generalized other has not held sway. Of course, symbolic interactionists would remind us that the story of Nell is fiction.

A SAMPLER OF APPLIED SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Since Mead believed that a theory is valuable to the extent that it is useful, I've pulled together six separate applications of symbolic interactionism. Not only will this provide a taste of the practical insights the theory has generated, it will give you a chance to review some of the theoretical ideas covered in the chapter.

Creating Reality. Shakespeare wrote, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."[23] In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* University of California, Berkeley, sociologist Erving Goffman develops the metaphor of social interaction as a dramaturgical performance.[24] Goffman claims

that we are all involved in a constant negotiation with others to publicly define our identity and the nature of the situation. He warns that "the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by minor mishaps."[25] His colleague Joan Emerson outlines the cooperative effort required to sustain the definition of a gynecological exam as a routine medical procedure.[26] The doctor and nurse enact their roles in a medical setting to assure patients that "everything is normal, no one is embarrassed, no one is thinking in sexual terms." The audience of one is reassured only when the actors give a consistent performance.

Meaning-ful Research. Mead advocated research through participant observation, a form of ethnography. Like Jerry in the movie *Nell,* researchers systematically set out to share in the lives of the people they study. The participant observer adopts the stance of an interested—yet ignorant—visitor who listens carefully to what people say in order to discover how they interpret their world. Mead had little sympathy for tightly controlled behavioral experiments or checklist surveys. The results might be quantifiable, but the lifeless numbers are void of the meaning the experience had for the person. Mead would have liked the wrangler who said that the only way to understand horses is to smell like a horse, eat from a trough, and sleep in a stall. That's participant observation. Undoubtedly, *Seabiscuit's* trainer and *The Horse Whisperer* were symbolic interactionists.

Participant observation
A method of adopting the stance of an ignorant yet interested visitor who carefully notes what people say and do in order to discover how they interpret their world.

Generalized Other. The sobering short story "Cipher in the Snow" tells the true account of a boy who is treated as a nonentity by his parents, his teachers, and other children. Their negative responses gradually reduce him to what they perceive him to be—nothing. He eventually collapses and dies in a snowbank for no apparent reason. The interactionist would describe his death as symbolic manslaughter.[27]

Naming. Here's a partial list of epithets heard in public places over a one-year period; they were all spoken in a demeaning voice: *dummy, ugly, slob, fag, nigger, retard, fundamentalist, liberal, Neanderthal, slut, liar.* Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can *really* hurt me. Name-calling can be devastating because the labels force us to view ourselves in a warped mirror. The grotesque images aren't easily dismissed.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. One implication of the looking-glass-self hypothesis is that each of us has a significant impact on how others view themselves. That kind of interpersonal power is often referred to as *self-fulfilling prophecy*, the tendency for our expectations to evoke responses in others that confirm what we originally anticipated. The process is nicely summed up by Eliza Doolittle, a woman from the gutter in George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion:* "The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated."[28]

Self-fulfilling prophecy
The tendency for our expectations to evoke responses that confirm what we originally anticipated.

Symbol Manipulation. Saul Alinsky was a product of the "Chicago School" of sociology at a time when Mead was having his greatest influence. Similar to Barack Obama, Alinsky became a community organizer in Chicago when he finished grad school, and applied what he learned to empower the urban poor. For example, in the early 1960s he helped found The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) to oppose his alma mater's complicity in substandard neighborhood housing.

He searched for a symbol that would galvanize Woodlawn residents into united action and stir the sympathies of other Chicago residents. He had previously described his technique for selecting a symbolic issue:

> You start with the people, their traditions, their prejudices, their habits, their attitudes and all of those other circumstances that make up their lives. It should always be remembered that a real organization of the people . . . must be rooted in the experiences of the people themselves.[29]

Alinsky found his symbol in the rats that infested the squalid apartments. TWO's rallying cry became "Rats as big as cats." Not only did the city start to crack down on slum landlords, but for the first time Woodlawn residents gained a sense of identity, pride, and political clout.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: LEVINAS' RESPONSIVE "I"

Responsive "I"
The self created by the way we respond to others.

Ethical echo
The reminder that we are responsible to take care of each other; I am my brother's keeper.

Face of the "Other"
A human signpost that points to our ethical obligation to care for the other before we care for self.

European Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas agrees with Mead that the self is socially constructed. He states that "without the Other, there is no 'I.' "[30] (Note that Levinas uses the term *"I"* to refer to what Mead calls the *self*—the "I" and the "me.") But there's a striking difference between how the two theorists think this construction project takes place. Mead contends that the looking-glass self develops through the way *others respond to us;* Levinas insists that the identity of our "I" is formed by the way *we respond to others.*

Levinas uses the term *ethical echo* to designate the responsibility he believes we all have to take care of each other. That ethical echo has existed since the beginning of human history and is summed up in the words, *"I am my brother's keeper."* The way each of us meets that obligation shapes our "I." Levinas says that every time we gaze at *the face of the Other,* we are reminded of our caretaking responsibility. Thus, each person's face is a signpost pointing to the panhuman ethical requirement to actively care for all people. Levinas suggests that "the best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes."[31] If we notice the color of his eyes—or by extension the shape of her body—we aren't really in a social relationship with the Other. And since the "I" finds its identity in responding to and caring for the Other, not allowing the humanity of that face to register puts our identity at risk.

Levinas is clear about the burden that comes with looking at the face of the Other:

> My world is ruptured, my contentment interrupted. I am already obligated. Here is an appeal from which there is no escape, a responsibility, a state of being hostage. It is looking into the face of the Other that reveals the call to a responsibility that is before any beginning, decision or initiative on my part. . . . I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, [even if I were] to die for it. Reciprocity is *his* affair.[32]

Duquesne University communication ethicist Ron Arnett regards Levinas as the premier ethical voice of the twentieth century. Arnett acknowledges that urging others to adopt a responsive "I" ethical standard is not an easy "sell" in this postmodern age, with its quest for comfort and self-actualization.[33] Yet he notes that even in his dark hours as a prisoner in a World War II German concentration camp, Levinas found joy in embracing the human responsibility of being for the

Other before oneself. To the extent that we follow Levinas' lead, Arnett suggests that our interpersonal communication will be characterized more by listening than telling.[34]

CRITIQUE: SETTING THE GOLD STANDARD FOR THREE INTERPRETIVE CRITERIA

"Viewing theory as testable explanations of directly or indirectly observable social regularities, Mead's ideas are seriously flawed."[35] That's the judgment of Indiana University sociologist Sheldon Stryker, and I agree. If we treat symbolic interactionism as an objective theory that must meet scientific standards of prediction and testability, it's a poor theory. But Mead's work was highly interpretive and deserves to be evaluated on the six criteria for good interpretive theories offered in Chapter 3, "Weighing the Words."

Let's start with *clarification of values,* which Mead does exceedingly well. Drawing upon William James, John Dewey, and other pragmatists, Mead proclaimed that humans are free to make meaningful choices on how to act when facing problems. In his critique, Stryker reveals, "What fascinated me as an undergraduate and graduate student was in part the dignity accorded humans by seeing them as important determiners of their lives rather than the pure product of conditioning."[36] Of course, this freedom and dignity are dependent upon our ability to communicate.

Certainly Mead offers a marvelous new *understanding of people* by showing how humans socially construct their concept of self as well as the way society influences—yet doesn't dictate—that construction project. We also can gain a new appreciation of human diversity from the extensive *ethnographic research* his theory inspired that describes individuals in similar situations responding in strikingly different ways.

Both the theory and the theorist have more than satisfied a fourth interpretive requirement for a good theory—emergence of a *community of agreement*. The once-radical Mead–Cooley looking-glass-self hypothesis has now become a truism in the field of sociology.[37] Mead, a philosopher who saw communication as the most human thing people do, has been called "America's greatest sociological thinker."[38] Even if the text you use in your interpersonal course doesn't mention the theorist or the theory by name, you can spot Mead's pervasive influence by the way the book treats the topic of self-concept.

Symbolic interactionism doesn't meet the other two criteria for an interpretive theory nearly as well as the four discussed above. Given Mead's personal efforts to help the displaced and distressed amidst urban industrialization, it's puzzling that Mead's theory doesn't call for *reform of society*. His theory says little about power or emotion—realities that a community organizer deals with every day.

In contrast to *aesthetic appeal,* most readers of *Mind, Self, and Society* get bogged down in the baffling array of ideas Mead tried to cover. The theory's fluid boundaries, vague concepts, and undisciplined approach don't lend themselves to an elegant summary. There are no *CliffsNotes* for this one. Perhaps Mead was precise when he presented his ideas in class, but their exact meaning was blurred in the years before his students compiled the manuscript. Whatever the explanation is, the theory suffers from a lack of clarity.

A final note: Symbolic interactionism may also suffer from overstatement. Mead repeatedly declared that our capacity for language—the ability to use and

interpret abstract symbols—is what distinguishes humans from other animals. My former graduate assistant is the mother of a son who has a permanent peripheral nerve disorder. His eyes, ears, and other sense receptors work fine, but the messages they send get scrambled on the way to his brain. Doctors say that he is, and always will be, unable to talk or interact with others on a symbolic level. After reading an early draft of this chapter, my assistant asked, "So this means that Caleb is less than human?" Her haunting question serves as a caution to any theorist who claims to have captured the essence of humanity.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Blumer's three core *premises of symbolic interactionism* deal with *meaning, language,* and *thinking.* According to Blumer, which comes first? Can you make a case for an alternative sequence?

2. What do interactionists believe are the crucial differences between *human beings* and *animals*? What would you add to or subtract from the list?

3. As Mead used the terms, is a *looking-glass self* the same thing as a person's *me?* Why or why not?

4. Think of a time in your life when your self-concept changed in a significant way. Do you think the shift occurred because *others viewed you differently* or because *you treated others differently*? Could Mead and Levinas both be right?

SELF-QUIZ

For chapter self-quizzes, go to the book's Online Learning Center at *www.mhhe.com/griffin8.*

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Larry T. Reynolds and Nancy J. Herman-Kinney (eds.), *Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism,* AltaMira, Walnut Creek, CA, 2003:

Gil Musolf, "The Chicago School," pp. 91–117.

Bernard Meltzer, "Mind," pp. 253–266.

Andrew Weigert and Viktor Gecas, "Self," pp. 267–288.

Michael Katovich and David Maines, "Society," pp. 289–306.

Primary source: George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society,* University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, 1934.

Development of Mead's ideas: Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism,* Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1969, pp. 1–89.

Summary statement: Herbert Blumer, "Symbolic Interaction: An Approach to Human Communication," in *Approaches to Human Communication,* Richard W. Budd and Brent Ruben (eds.), Spartan Books, New York, 1972, pp. 401–419.

Basic concepts of symbolic interactionism: John Hewitt, *Self and Society: A Symbolic Interactionist Social Psychology,* 10th ed., Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA, 2006, pp. 36–81.

The self as a social construction: Susan Harter, "Symbolic Interactionism Revisited: Potential Liabilities for the Self Constructed in the Crucible of Interpersonal Relationships," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly,* Vol. 45, 1999, pp. 677–703.

Looking-glass self—a research review: David Lundgren, "Social Feedback and Self-Appraisals: Current Status of the Mead–Cooley Hypothesis," *Symbolic Interaction,* Vol. 27, 2004, pp. 267–286.

Generalized other: Clare Holdsworth and David Morgan, "Revisiting the Generalized Other: An Exploration," *Sociology,* Vol. 41, 2007, pp. 401–417.

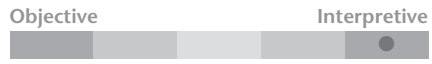
Theory application: Jodi O'Brien (ed.), *The Production of Reality,* 4th ed., Pine Forge, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2005.

Levinas' responsive "I": Ronald C. Arnett, "The Responsive 'I': Levinas' Derivative Argument," *Argumentation and Advocacy,* Vol. 40, 2003, pp. 39–50.

Critique: Peter Hull, "Structuring Symbolic Interaction: Communication and Power," *Communication Yearbook 4,* Dan Nimmo (ed.), Transaction Books, New Brunswick, NJ, 1980, pp. 49–60.

Critique: Sheldon Stryker, "From Mead to a Structural Symbolic Interactionism and Beyond," *Annual Review of Sociology,* Vol. 34, 2008, p. 18.

CHAPTER 6



Socio-cultural tradition
Phenomenological tradition

Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM)

of W. Barnett Pearce & Vernon Cronen

Barnett Pearce (The Fielding Graduate University) and Vernon Cronen (University of Massachusetts) believe that communication is the process by which we collectively create the events and objects of our social world.[1] Their theory, the coordinated management of meaning (CMM), starts with the assertion that *persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create.* Stated another way, every conversation has an *afterlife*. Tomorrow's social reality is the afterlife of how we interact today. That's why Pearce and Cronen find it useful to ask, *What are we making together? How are we making it? How can we make better social worlds?*

First introduced in 1978, CMM has evolved in at least three distinct, yet compatible, directions. Pearce and Cronen have always regarded CMM as an *interpretive theory*. In 1998 they also began to refer to it as a *critical theory*—or at least one with a critical edge. And since the mid-1990s, Pearce and Cronen have emphasized that CMM is a *practical theory*. Because most current research and writing about the theory focuses on its usefulness in analyzing and improving communication, I'll start by describing its pragmatic side.

CMM AS A PRACTICAL THEORY—STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Pearce and Cronen present CMM as a practical theory crafted to help make life better for real people in a real world.[2] They believe a practical communication theory should offer a variety of tools to help us understand flawed patterns of interaction, identify critical moments in our conversations, and it should suggest ways to talk that will create a better social environment. CMM offers a wide array of concepts, descriptions, and models to do that. Therapists, mediators, social workers, consultants, and teachers find these helpful as they seek to assist others. The following first-person narratives are a sample of the theory in practice.

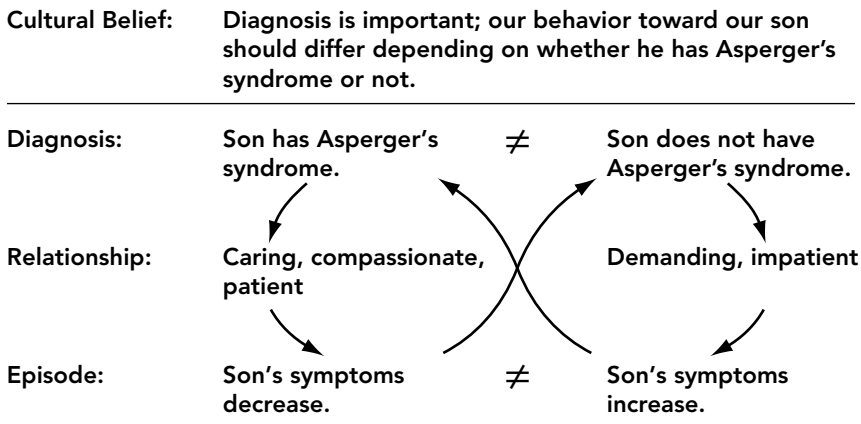


FIGURE 6–1 A Strange Loop of Diagnosis and Behavior
Courtesy of W. Barnett Pearce

Family Therapy

From John Burnham, consultant family therapist, Parkview Clinic, Birmingham, England

A father and mother came to me to talk about their 14-year-old son who was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism. Halfway through the session it hit me that the boy and his parents were trapped in a repetitive pattern of behavior that CMM calls a *strange loop* (see Figure 6–1). If the parents accepted the diagnosis of Asperger's, they acted toward their son in a compassionate, patient, and forgiving way. Yet when they treated him this way, the boy improved to such an extent that it led them to think, *This is not Asperger's.* Under their altered belief they began to be less forgiving toward their son. He in turn deteriorated, which led them to think, *This is Asperger's,* and so on.

Strange loop
An unwanted repetitive communication pattern—"Darn, we did it again."

When I described this never-ending loop, the parents acted as if a light had been turned on. As long as they treated the question of whether this was Asperger's, the family continued to retrace the closed-circuit, figure-eight path. But the diagram of the loop that they were in helped me suggest a different question: *What relationship do you want with your son?* By focusing on what they were making together rather than what their son had or didn't have, their chances of escaping from this loop were increased. This approach worked well for the parents and their son, and they began to report many positive changes in their relationships with each other. They then moved on to ask, *When is it useful to think of this odd behavior as Asperger's, and when is it not?* I now use CMM's idea of strange loops in my work with other families whose children have been diagnosed as having a specific mental disorder. I tell this story because, like the parents, I learned that labeling a disease has significant consequences.[3]

Mediation

From Jonathan Shailor, professor of communication, University of Wisconsin–Parkside

In my mediation work, I act in the roles of practitioner, researcher, and trainer. In all of these roles I use the CMM concept of levels of meaning to tease out disputants' and mediators' constructions of episodes, relationships, identities,

and cultural patterns. For example, what story does she tell about the *episode* that answers the question, *Why did we come to mediation?* What story does she voice about her *relationship* with the other disputant? How does she construct her *identity?* Do *cultural narratives* come into play?

Peter and Anne were a young couple who fell into a pattern of angry fighting, which culminated with Anne obtaining a restraining order that forced Peter to move out of the apartment. A judge approved the order on the condition that the couple participate in mediation and then return to court for further review. In the mediation session, Peter framed this sequence as the story of "Anne's betrayal," a detailed series of events in which Anne's actions were interpreted as attacks and cold-blooded manipulations. Peter explained his own actions as necessary acts of self-defense, ignoring all other aspects of their relationship.

Anne constructed an autobiographical narrative that linked her history of family abuse with her sense of being "endangered" by Peter. In that context, a continued relationship with Peter was seen as dangerous. For Anne, any agreement in mediation that might compromise her physical or economic security would define her as a "victim."

Peter demanded that Anne pay for the rent during the two weeks that he was prevented from living in the apartment. This demand made sense, of course, within the subsystem of contextual meanings that Peter had assembled. But Anne interpreted this demand within her own subsystem of meanings and was determined not to play the part of the victim. Her refusal to pay confirmed Peter's construction of Anne as his persecutor and obligated him to press for retribution by looking for concessions on other issues, which she then refused, and so on.

After the mediation was over, CMM helped me describe to the two mediators the reflexive process of action and interpretation that they were co-constructing with Peter and Anne. By focusing their attention on the disputants' enactments of episodes, relationships, identities, and cultural patterns, I was able to help them see how mediator communication can either open up or shut down opportunities for empowerment.[4]

Cupertino Community Project

From W. Barnett Pearce and Kimberly A. Pearce, Public Dialogue Consortium

In 1996, the Public Dialogue Consortium[5] approached the city manager of Cupertino, California, and offered to introduce a productive form of communication to discuss the most pressing issue within the community—*ethnic diversity.* Many residents privately described race relations as a "powder keg waiting to go off," yet were unwilling to speak of it publicly for fear of providing the spark.

Our task was to change the form of communication, showing people that they could hold onto and express their deeply held convictions in a form of communication that promoted reciprocal understanding. The first phase of the project consisted of structuring situations in which people with all sorts of views could speak in a manner that made others want to listen, and listen in a way that made others want to speak. We call this *dialogic communication.* When key members of the community gained confidence in this type of communication, it was time to focus on specific issues. Working with the city government and an independent citizens' group, we invited all community members to a

"Diversity Forum" in order to give them an opportunity to discuss the way Cupertino handled three flashpoint issues—a Mandarin immersion program in the schools, public signs written only in Chinese, and a multicultural Fourth of July celebration.

The centerpiece of the forum consisted of numerous small-group discussions facilitated by members of the community. Each facilitator received at least 10 hours of training.[6] The challenge the facilitators faced was to help participants communicate dialogically beyond what they were initially willing or able to do. To accomplish this task, we trained each facilitator to (a) frame the forum as a special event in which unusual forms of communication would occur; (b) remain neutral by actively aligning oneself with all participants; (c) help people tell their own stories by expressing curiosity and asking questions; (d) enable people to tell even better stories through appreciative reframing and the weaving together of diverse stories; and (e) provide "in-the-moment" coaching and intervention.

Dialogic communication Conversation in which people speak in a manner that makes others want to listen, and listen in a way that makes others want to speak.

The dialogic communication that they stimulated transformed the social environment of Cupertino. A year after the forum only 2 percent of the residents mentioned race or ethnic diversity as a problem. The city manager interpreted this response to mean that people had finished "working through" the issue and that increased diversity was "an accomplished fact of life."

In the Cupertino Project we were particularly well served by CMM's insistence that communication creates the events and objects of our social world. We reaffirmed that dialogue requires remaining in the tension between holding our own perspective and being profoundly open to others who are unlike us, and enabling others to act similarly.[7]

These are just three of many examples from professionals who use CMM ideas and models in their work. I'll refer back to these stories throughout the chapter to illustrate practical applications of the theory that anyone can use to create more favorable social worlds.

CMM AS AN INTERPRETIVE THEORY—PICTURING PERSONS-IN-CONVERSATION

The CMM users who tell these stories refer to themselves as *social constructionists.* From their stories you can spot that they share the core conviction that our social environment is not something we find or discover. Instead, we create it. As was stated at the start of the chapter, they're convinced that **persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create.**

Social constructionists Language theorists who believe that persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create.

Figure 6–2 presents artist M. C. Escher's 1955 lithograph *Bond of Union,* which strikingly illustrates CMM notions about persons-in-conversation. The unusual drawing illustrates the following tenets of the theory:

1. The experience of persons-in-conversation is the primary social process of human life. Pearce says that this core concept 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."[8] He sees the ribbon in Escher's drawing as representing the of communication. It isn't just one of the activities the pair does or a tool they use to achieve some other end. On the contrary, their communication literally forms who they are and creates their relationship. In that sense, communication is performative—it does something to them quite apart from the issue they're discussing. The

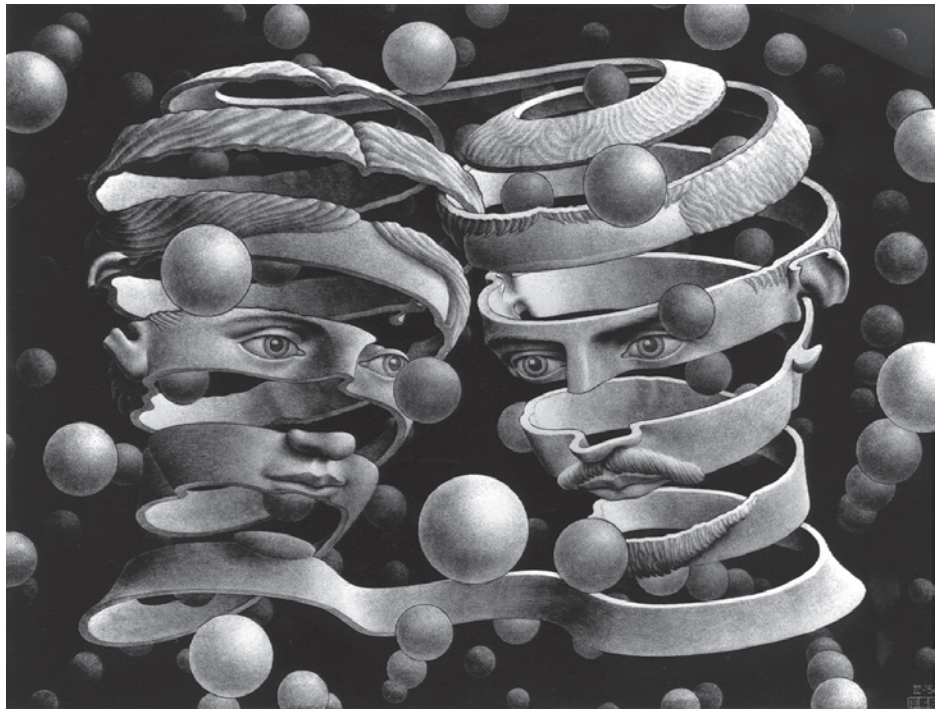


FIGURE 6–2 M. C. Escher's *Bond of Union*

Cupertino Community Project radically altered the face of the community, not by changing what citizens wanted to talk *about*, but by changing the *form* of their communication.

2. The way people communicate is often more important than the content of what they say. The mood and manner that persons-in-conversation adopt plays a large role in the social construction process. Pearce points 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.[9]

The parties in mediation, therapy, or ethnic disputes are often stuck in a destructive pattern of interaction. They call each other racists, liars, or jerks; they describe the other person's actions as criminal, cruel, or crazy. Since Pearce regards language as "the single most powerful tool that humans have ever invented for the creation of social worlds,"[10] he thinks it's tragic when people in conflict are caught up in a language game that they are bound to lose. MRI scans show that interpersonal distress affects the brain the same way as a punch in the stomach.[11]

CMM theorists speak of a *logic of meaning and action* that is made in the give-and-take of conversation. Consider this all-too-familiar sequence: You say

something, and I respond. That response makes you feel that you must instruct me about the error of my ways, but I don't feel that I should take instruction from you. So I inform you that you are not qualified to have an opinion on this topic, and that information conflicts with your self-concept as an intelligent, knowledgeable person, so you lash out with a bitter insult. In just five turns, we've moved into an escalating pattern in which we are competing to see who can say the most hurtful things to the other. By this time, the original topic of conversation is irrelevant. We can continue this feud forever, fueled only by the *logical force* of the interaction, trapped in a sense of oughtness that has us in its grip. When informed by CMM, mediators, therapists, consultants, and teachers become attuned to the logic of meaning and action generated by the way the turns in a conversation are connected. Armed with this understanding, they are equipped to intervene, breaking the destructive cycle and creating an opportunity for better patterns of communication to emerge.

Logical force
The moral pressure or sense of obligation a person feels to respond in a given way to what someone else has just said or done—"I had no choice."

3. The actions of persons-in-conversation are reflexively reproduced as the interaction continues. Reflexivity means that our actions have effects that bounce back and affect us. "An act performed by a person also acts upon the person who performed it."[12] The endless ribbon in *Bond of Union* loops back to *re*form both people. 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?"

Reflexivity
The process by which the effects of our words and actions on others bounce back and affect us.

Escher's spheres suspended in space can be seen as worlds or planets of the social universe that is also co-constructed by the intertwined actors. "When we communicate," writes Pearce, "we are not just talking about the world, we are literally participating in the creation of the social universe."[13] For years, environmentalists have stressed that we have to live in the world that we produce. By fouling the air we breathe, we pollute the quality of our lives—as residents of Mexico City and those who live and work on the shore of the Gulf of Mexico know all too well. In like fashion, Pearce and Cronen are social ecologists who alert us to the long-term effects of our communication practices.

Do the persons-in-conversation shown in Figure 6–2 realize that they are creating the social universe in which they talk and act? If they're like the parents who went to the family therapist to discuss their son's Asperger's syndrome, probably not. Yet that's the task that CMM practitioners have set for themselves—to get people to first ask and then answer the question, *What are we making together?*

4. As social constructionists, CMM researchers see themselves as curious participants in a pluralistic world. They are *curious* because they think it's folly to profess certainty when dealing with individuals acting 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. So Escher's *Bond of Union* is an apt representation of persons-in-conversation even when one of the parties is a CMM researcher.

Pearce regards Australian Ernest Stringer's *community-based action research* as a model for doing research. Action research is a "collaborative approach to investigation that seeks to engage community members as equal and full participants in the research process."[14] That research bond goes way beyond the

"participant observation" approach favored by symbolic interactionists (see Chapter 5). Action researchers work together with people to build a picture of what's going on. They then develop a shared minitheory as to why relationships are the way they are. Finally, they enact a cooperative plan to change things for the better. That's exactly the approach taken by the Public Dialogue Consortium in Cupertino.

The *Bond of Union* lithograph helps us grasp what Pearce and Cronen mean when they say that persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities. But the drawing doesn't show that *stories* are the basic means that people use to pursue these social joint ventures. Since all of us perceive, think, and live our lives in terms of characters, roles, plots, and narrative sequences, CMM theorists say we shouldn't be surprised that the social worlds we create take the shape of story.

CMM AS AN INTERPRETIVE THEORY—STORIES TOLD AND STORIES LIVED

CMM theorists draw a distinction between *stories lived* and *stories told.* Stories lived are the co-constructed actions that we perform with others. *Coordination* takes place when we fit our stories lived into the stories lived by others in a way that makes life better. Stories told are the narratives that we use to make sense of stories lived.[15]

Pearce and Cronen note that the stories we tell and the stories we live are always tangled together, yet forever in tension. That's because one is the stuff of language and the other is the way we act. In stories told, a cocky young man can envision being faster than a speeding bullet and able to leap over tall buildings in a single bound. But in stories lived, inertia, gravity, and the witness of other people impose limits on what he can do. This tension is why Pearce and Cronen label their theory the *management of meaning;* we're obliged to adjust our stories told to fit the realities of our stories lived—or vice versa. They put the term *coordinated* in the title because we have to constantly make these adjustments through interactions with others. As practical theorists as well as interpretive theorists, they want to help people interpret what's said and coordinate those words with actions so that the social environment they create is one in which they can survive and thrive. Pearce and Cronen use CMM's concepts and models as ways of displaying the complexity of communication processes. Each layer of complexity provides a potential opening for strategic action.

Making and Managing Meaning Through Stories Told

The stories we tell are open to many interpretations. Pearce and Cronen offer a variety of communication models to help people figure out what's going on in a conversation. In Figure 6–3, I've combined two of them—the *hierarchy model of meaning* and the *serpentine model*—into a single drawing.[16] You'll find it helpful to think of this hierarchical–serpentine model as a schematic diagram of the communication process taking place in Escher's *Bond of Union.*

Hierarchy of meaning A rank order of the relative significance of contexts—episode, relationship, identity, and culture—that encompass a given story as an aid to interpretation.

According to the hierarchy model of meaning, storytelling is the central act of communication, but every story is embedded within multiple contexts, or frames. No matter what the speaker says, the words of a story will make sense

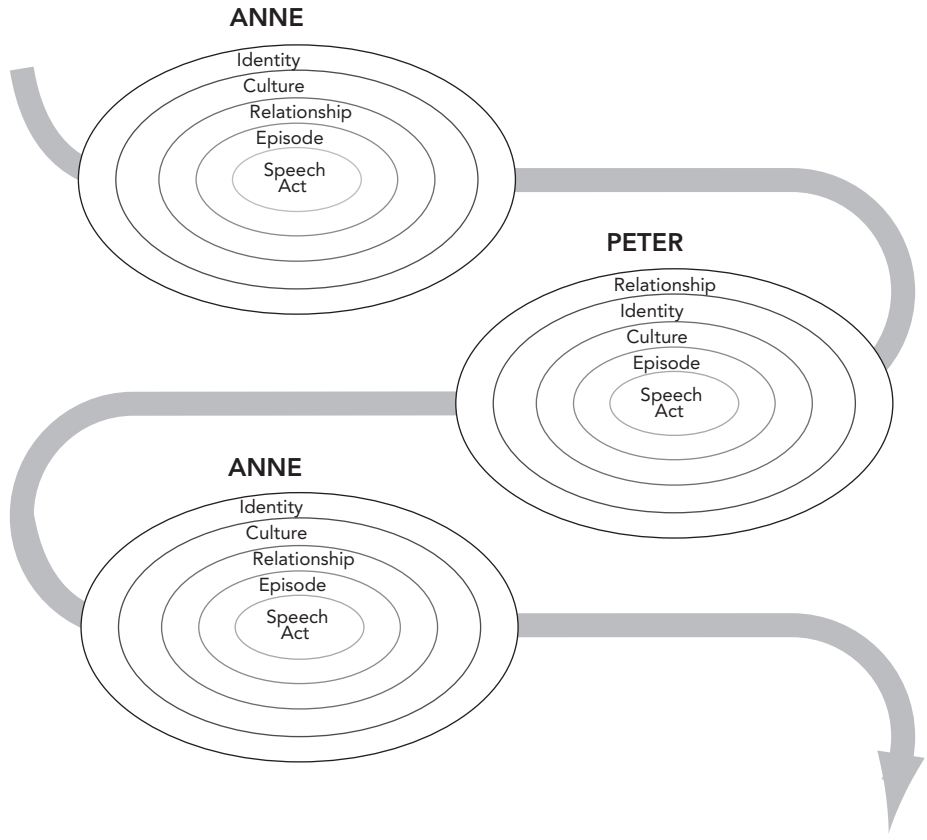


FIGURE 6–3 Hierarchical–Serpentine Model

only if they are understood within the framework of a specific *episode,* the *relationship* between the parties, the self-*identity* of the speaker, and the organizational or societal *culture* from which he or she comes. These contexts rarely have equal significance when we try to figure out what another person means, so Pearce suggests we rank-order their importance for interpreting a specific *speech act*—giving most weight to the overarching frame that encompasses all others.

Speech act
Any verbal or nonverbal message as part of an interaction; the basic building block of the social universe people create; threats, promises, insults, compliments, etc.

For example, consider the way many high school seniors talk about "The Prom." The stories they tell often elevate the *episode* to mythic proportions, yet their descriptions seem to downplay a romantic *relationship* with their prom date. The hierarchy of meaning that we construct makes a big difference. If the prom event has the most importance, there might be several partners who could serve equally well as satisfying dates. But if a specific relationship is what's most important to you, you could probably find other things to do that would be equally as enjoyable as the prom—and certainly less expensive.

Since Jonathan Shailor employs these four contexts in his analysis of communication patterns in mediation, I'll illustrate their place in the hierarchical–serpentine model referring to the dispute between Peter and Anne. Assume that Peter's *speech act* in the figure is his story of Anne's betrayal told during their court-appointed mediation.

Episode
A "nounable" sequence of speech acts with a beginning and an end that are held together by story; an argument, interview, wedding, mediation, etc.

Episode. An episode is a sequence of speech acts with a beginning and an end that are held together by story. Pearce and Cronen say that such sequences are "nounable." The noun used to designate an episode should answer the question, *What does he think he's doing?* The term *mediation* labels the episode that Shailor described. Mediators hope that their participation as a neutral third party will elicit patterns of speech acts that are part of the solution rather than part of the problem. But the fact that both Peter and Anne were locked into their separate stories of "betrayal" and "endangerment" suggests that the mediation episode had little impact on the hostile social world they were making.

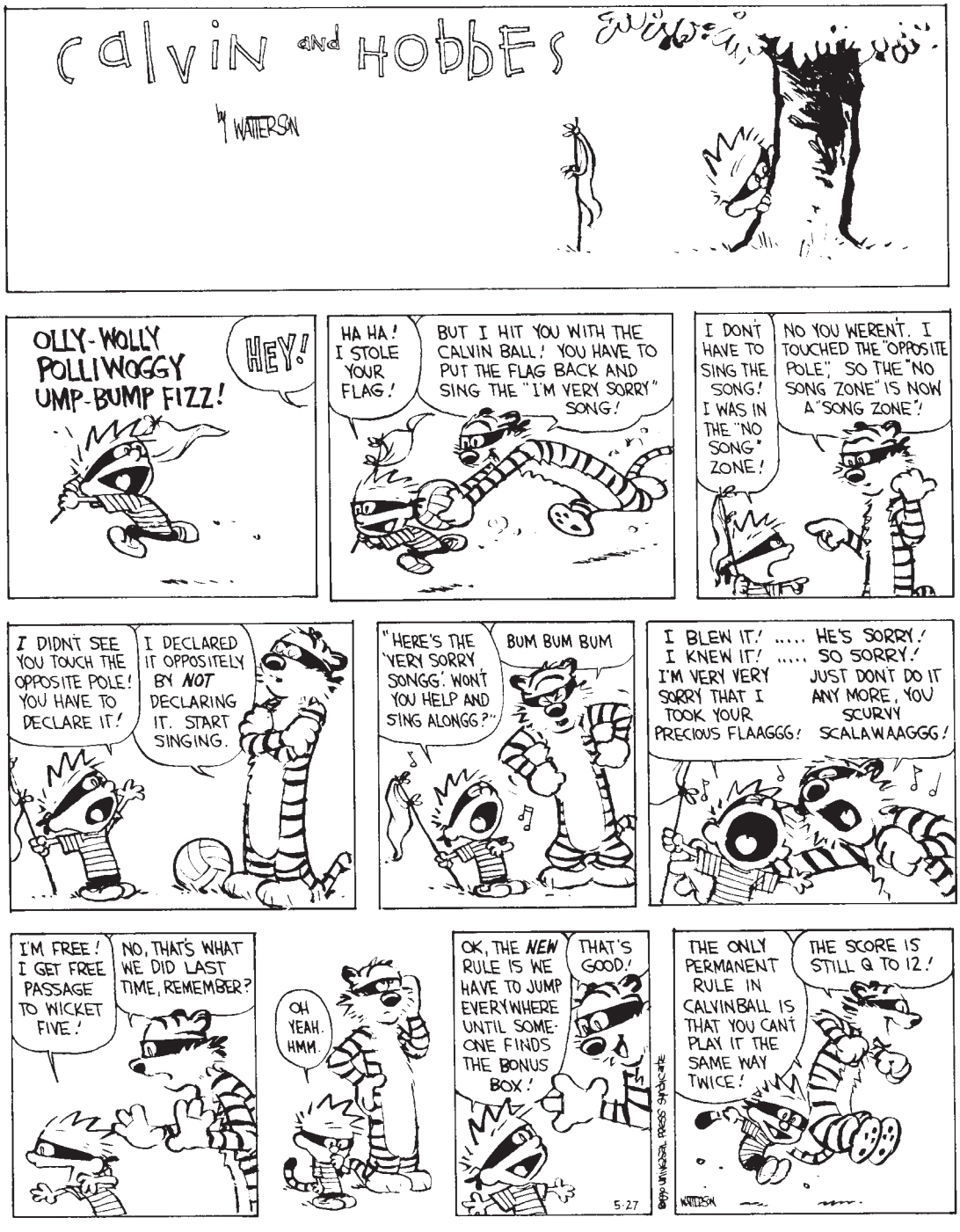
Relationship. Pearce says that relationships emerge from the dynamic dance over coordinated actions and managed meanings. And just as punctuation provides a context for the printed word, the relationship between persons-in-conversation suggests how a speech act might be interpreted. This is especially true for Peter, who is fixated on Anne's betrayal in a way that blots out everything else. Without exacting some kind of retribution, he can't get on with his life. As for Anne, the relationship is important only if it doesn't end. She's in court to make sure that it does.

Identity. CMM holds that our identity is continually crafted through the process of communication, and in turn our self-image becomes a context for how we manage meaning. For Anne, Peter's demand for money is less about their broken relationship than it is about a potential threat to her self-identity. She's unwilling to do anything that suggests she is a passive victim. By asking the judge for a restraining order and refusing to pay rent for the apartment, she sees herself as actively rewriting her personal life script. Regarding Peter's self-concept, the story is mute.

Culture. Since the term *culture* describes webs of shared meanings and values, people who come from different cultures won't interpret messages exactly the same way. Although Shailor's mediation story doesn't suggest that Anne's ethnic or national background differs from Peter's, the history of abuse in her family of origin makes it difficult for her to make or manage meaning cooperatively with anyone who hasn't experienced a similar subculture of violence. Peter doesn't seem able to relate to her background of physical and verbal abuse.

The two identical sets of concentric ellipses on the left side of Figure 6–3 display my perception of Anne's hierarchy of meaning. The all-encompassing concern for her personal identity relegates the other contexts to lesser importance. As for Peter, I see his fixation with their relationship as the overarching frame that encompasses all other contexts. My judgment is depicted in the set of ovals on the right-hand side of the model. The interpretive trick, of course, is to figure out which context is dominant in any particular conversation. That's one reason a CMM analysis of communication is more art than science.

The *serpentine flow of conversation* is the other CMM model blended into Figure 6–3. Similar to Escher's *Bond of Union,* the diagram suggests that what one person says affects—and is affected by—what the other person says. The contexts for what they're saying co-evolve even as they speak. So it's foolish to try to interpret Anne's first message, because we don't know what was said before. It's equally hard to decipher the meaning of Anne's second message because we don't know what follows. As the parents in family therapy suddenly grasped, any comment



about their son's mental health was both the result and the cause of other statements within the family. Perhaps this is the most striking feature of the serpentine model; it leaves no room for isolated acts of speech. Everything in a conversation is connected to everything else. Understanding how others make and manage meaning is possible only when we perceive the flow of conversation.

Do you get the impression from the hierarchical–serpentine model that even a brief conversation is a process that's incredibly complex and open-ended? If so, Pearce would be pleased. He thinks it's impossible to explain in a simple declarative sentence what a statement means—even when it's your own statement. For that reason, Pearce finds it difficult to give a straight answer when someone in a discussion asks him, "What does that mean?" Consistent with CMM thinking, he's tempted to reply, "I'm not completely sure yet. We haven't finished our conversation."[17]

Coordination: The Meshing of Stories Lived

Coordination
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.

According to CMM, *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."[18] This intentional meshing of stories lived does not 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 radical feminists could temporarily join forces to protest a 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. As the *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon on the previous page suggests, parties can coordinate effectively without much mutual understanding.

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

> 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 non-practicing 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.

Like many others who are fascinated with human interaction, CMM theorists enjoy descriptions of rules for meaning and action that are created in families, organizations, and cultures (see Chapters 14, 20, and 33). In light of the way real groups of people coordinate their actions without a great amount of mutual understanding, Calvin and Hobbes' game of "Calvinball" doesn't look that strange.

CMM AS A CRITICAL THEORY—SPOTTING HARMFUL AND HELPFUL COMMUNICATION

CMM began as an interpretive theory, its authors attempting to describe and understand recurring patterns of communication. As the theory has evolved, however, it's developed a critical edge.[19] CMM advocates today aren't satisfied with simply describing patterns of communication or providing tools for understanding how people interpret their social worlds. They want to function as *peacemakers,*

"providing a way of intelligently joining into the activity of the world so as to enrich it."[20] If any of us are tempted to dismiss the significance of helping others coordinate the way they talk with each other, CMM reminds us that communication has the power to create a social universe of alienation, anger, and malice—or one of community, tolerance, and generosity. The critical edge of CMM separates communication styles that are harmful from those that are helpful.

Naming Destructive Patterns of Communication: Offering a Better Way

As an example of where CMM's critical edge cuts, Pearce believes that the polarization of the electorate in the United States is both the cause and the product of communication patterns that he describes as *reciprocated diatribe*.[21] He claims that what former President George W. Bush labeled the "war on terror" is reproduced and sustained by patterns of communication that dismiss and demonize the other.[22] The president's address to the nation on the night of the 9/11 attacks set the tone. The speech, Pearce notes, "created an afterlife that magnified the effects of the terrorist attack and deteriorated the quality of life around the world."[23] A CMM view of the conflict between al-Qaeda and the United States suggests that *both* sides are acting morally according to their own understanding of the universe. Yet it's no surprise that each side calling the other "evil" isn't likely to resolve the conflict. As a way of expressing his own sense of horror and sadness at what he perceived as a missed opportunity to make the world a better place, Pearce wrote an alternative response that he wished the president had made that evening. A portion of Pearce's version goes as follows:

> If we are to understand why people hate us so much, we will have to understand how the world looks from their perspective. And if we are to respond effectively to protect ourselves, we must understand those whose sense of history and purpose are not like our own.
>
> It is tempting to see this vicious attack as the result of madmen trying to destroy civilization, and our response as a war of "good" against "evil." But if we are to understand what happened here today, and if we are to act effectively in the days to come, we must develop more sophisticated stories than these about the world, about our place in it, and about the consequences of our actions.
>
> This is a terrorist attack. If we are in a state of war, it is a different kind of war than we have ever fought before. Terrorists are not capable of occupying our country or meeting our armies on the field of battle. They hope to destroy our confidence, to disrupt our way of life. They hope that we will destroy ourselves by the way we respond to the atrocities that they commit. Our first reaction, that of wanting revenge, to lash out at those who have injured us so, is almost surely the wrong response because it makes us accomplices of what they are trying to achieve.[24]

COSMOPOLITAN COMMUNICATION—DISAGREE, YET COORDINATE

As a remedy to unsatisfactory or destructive patterns of interaction, CMM theorists advocate an uncommon form of communication they believe will create a social world where we can live with dignity, honor, joy, and love.[25] Over the last three decades, Pearce has used a number of terms to describe the communication style he values. He started by calling it *cosmopolitan communication*.[26] When applied to individuals, the label calls to mind a citizen of the world who interacts

comfortably with people who come from diverse cultural backgrounds, hold different values, and express discrepant beliefs. Pearce's cosmopolitan communicators assume that there is no single truth, or if there is, that it has many faces. So they try to find ways of coordinating with others with whom they do not—and perhaps should not—agree.

Cosmopolitan communication
Coordination with others who have different backgrounds, values, and beliefs, without trying to change them.

Although he still likes the concept of cosmopolitan communication, Pearce also uses the term *dialogue* in the same way that Jewish philosopher Martin Buber does—to describe what he believes is the optimum form of interaction. For Buber, *dialogic communication* "involves remaining in the tension between holding our own perspective while being profoundly open to the other."[27] This, of course, could be dangerous. As happened in Cupertino, we might learn something new that will change what we think, or even who we are.[28]

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."[29]

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 says we can do this only through dialogue.

For Buber, *dialogue* is 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, it is also a way 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:

Narrow ridge
A metaphor of I-Thou living in the dialogic tension between ethical relativism and rigid absolutism; standing your own ground while being profoundly open to the other.

> 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.[30]

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."[31] Despite that tension, many interpersonal theorists 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, Pearce is attracted to Buber's core belief that dialogue is a joint achievement that cannot be produced on demand, yet occurs among people who seek it and are prepared for it.

CRITIQUE: THREE THEORIES, THREE APPRAISALS

Because CMM's authors now regard it as an interpretive theory, a critical theory, and a practical theory, I'll offer three separate critiques. The first evaluation will use the six standards for an interpretive theory that I presented in Chapter 3. My appraisals of CMM as a critical and a practical theory are based on criteria set by others.

An Interpretive Theory

By offering such analytical tools as the hierarchical and serpentine models of communication, CMM promotes a better *understanding of people* and of the social worlds they create through their conversation. Pearce and Cronen's description of the ideal cosmopolitan communicator makes it clear that they *value* curiosity, participation, and an appreciation of diversity rather than the detached, aloof certainty of someone interacting in a my-way-is-Yahweh style.

If *reforming society* seems a bit of a stretch, recall that by teaching residents to speak in a dialogic way, Pearce and his associates changed the social world of Cupertino, California. And although many objectivist theorists ignore or dismiss CMM because of its social constructivist assumptions, CMM has generated widespread interest and *acceptance within the community* of interpretive communication scholars. Members of that community have investigated CMM's models of communication through a wide range of *qualitative research*—textual and narrative analysis, case studies, interviews, participant observation, ethnography, and collaborative action research.[32]

Despite meeting these five standards with ease, lack of clarity has seriously limited CMM's *aesthetic appeal*. CMM has a reputation of being a confusing mix of ideas that are hard to pin down because they're expressed in convoluted language. I'll revisit this problem in my analysis of CMM as a practical theory.

A Critical Theory

Most scholars who work within the critical tradition described in Chapter 4 don't consider CMM a critical theory. That's because Pearce and Cronen don't insist that *power* is the pivotal issue in all human relationships. San Francisco State University communication professor Victoria Chen concedes that she and other CMM practitioners don't automatically look for who controls a conversation in order to maintain dominance. But she's convinced that by systematically using the tools CMM provides, she and others can address unjust power relationships when they exist.[33]

Whether CMM is a viable *critical theory* depends on what that label means to the one making the judgment. If a critical theory is defined as one that unmasks how communication can perpetuate the unjust power imbalances in society, CMM doesn't make the grade. If the critical category is broad enough to include a theory that makes clear value judgments about patterns of communication and promotes the types that make better social worlds, then CMM is a worthy inclusion. By only claiming that CMM has a *critical edge*, Pearce, Cronen, and Chen make a reasonable case that CMM shouldn't be excluded.

A Practical Theory

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 practical theory.[34] He is not alone in that positive assessment. In "CMM: A Report from Users," multiple therapists, mediators, teachers, and consultants provide compelling examples of how CMM helps them in their work. Yet Texas A&M University communication professor Kevin Barge, a CMM advocate, adds a note of caution. He warns that a batch of enthusiastic reports of CMM in use isn't sufficient evidence to validate it as a practical theory. Pearce, Cronen, and their followers must show how the experience of practitioners has informed the theory. He adds that researchers need to establish when CMM tools are helpful, and when they aren't. There's more work to be done.[35]

There's one other hindrance to the theory's widespread usefulness. When Pearce asked longtime CMM practitioners 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. (Gabrielle Parker, Dance Movement Therapist)[36]

Pearce responds that he can train people to use CMM concepts, but not by asking them to read. He first asks them to describe something going on in their lives and then *shows* them rather than tells them how to use the ideas and models that the theory offers. Because that interactive option isn't available to us, I've tried to heed Parker's advice while writing this chapter. 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. Pearce introduces a full range of these concepts in *Making Social Worlds: A Communication Perspective,* a book he wrote in a more readable style.

You should know that there are coordinated management of meaning devotees who *live* CMM rather than simply using the practical tools it offers. These folks refer to CMM as *worldview, a way of life,* or as Barnett Pearce puts it, *a tradition of practice.* Describing what this means to them goes way beyond what I can accomplish in a first look at CMM. But for a compelling story of how CMM values and ideals have transformed Barnett Pearce's life when facing imminent death, read Kim Pearce's essay cited in the Second Look section: "Living into Very Bad News: The Use of CMM as Spiritual Practice."

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. *Social constructionists* see themselves as curious participants in a pluralistic world. Are you willing to not strive for certainty, a detached perspective, and 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 shared understanding—*coordination* without *coherence.* Can you think of examples from your own life?

4. Pearce and Cronen claim that CMM is a *practical theory.* What *consequences* do you foresee had George W. Bush delivered the speech Pearce wrote after the 9/11 attacks? What aspects of *dialogic communication* do you see in Pearce's version?

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment online at www.mhhe.com/griffin8 or www.afirstlook.com.

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 cosmopolitan communication. If so, is Pearce right in thinking that 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.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: W. Barnett Pearce, *Making Social Worlds: A Communication Perspective*, Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2008.

Brief overview with extended example: W. Barnett Pearce, "The Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM)," in *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication,* William Gudykunst (ed.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2004, pp. 35–54.

Early statement of theory: W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon E. Cronen, *Communication, Action, and Meaning: The Creation of Social Realities,* Praeger, New York, 1980; also www.cios.org/www/opentext.htm.

Development of a three-in-one theory: W. Barnett Pearce, "Evolution and Transformation: A Brief History of CMM and a Meditation on What Using It Does to Us," in *Making Lives and Making Meaning: Reflective, Facilitative, and Interpretative Practice of the Coordinated Management of Meaning* (tentative title), C. Creede, B. Fisher-Yoshida, and P. Gallegos (eds.), in press.

Social construction: W. Barnett Pearce, "Communication as Social Construction: Reclaiming Our Birthright," in *Socially Constructing Communication,* Gloria J. Galanes and Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz (eds.), Hampton, Cresskill, NJ, 2009, pp. 33–56.

Coordination and coherence: W. Barnett Pearce, *Communication and the Human Condition,* Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL, 1989, pp. 32–87.

Intellectual heritage: Vernon E. Cronen, "Coordinated Management of Meaning: The Consequentiality of Communication and the Recapturing of Experience," in *The Consequentiality of Communication,* Stuart Sigman (ed.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ, 1995, pp. 17–65.

Peacemaking: W. Barnett Pearce and Stephen W. Littlejohn, *Moral Conflict: When Social Worlds Collide,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1997.

Dialogic communication: W. Barnett Pearce and Kimberly A. Pearce, "Combining Passions and Abilities: Toward Dialogic Virtuosity," *Southern Communication Journal,* Vol. 65, 2000, pp. 161–175.

Buber's dialogic ethics: Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* 2nd ed., R. G. Smith (trans.), Scribner, New York, 1958.

Research review of CMM: J. Kevin Barge and W. Barnett Pearce, "A Reconnaissance of CMM Research," *Human Systems,* Vol. 15, 2004, pp. 13–32.

CMM as a critical theory: Victoria Chen, "The Possibility of Critical Dialogue in the Theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning," *Human Systems,* Vol. 15, 2004, pp. 179–192.

CMM as a practical theory: J. Kevin Barge, "Articulating CMM as a Practical Theory," *Human Systems,* Vol. 15, 2004, pp. 193–204.

CMM as a way of life: Kimberly Pearce, "Living into Very Bad News: The Use of CMM as Spiritual Practice," in *Making Lives and Making Meaning: Reflective, Facilitative, and Interpretative Practice of the Coordinated Management of Meaning* (tentative title), C. Creede, B. Fisher-Yoshida, and P. Gallegos (eds.), in press.

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that illustrate CMM, click on Suggested Movie Clips under Theory Resources at
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