

Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM)

of W. Barnett Pearce & Vernon Cronen

Barnett Pearce (The Fielding Graduate Institute) and Vernon Cronen (University of Massachusetts) believe that communication is the process by which we collectively make 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*. That's why Pearce and Cronen focus on the things that we *do* to each other and the things that we *make* with each other when we interact. When engaged in a conversation with others, these theorists find it useful to ask: *What are we doing? What are we making together? How can we make better social worlds?*

Pearce and Cronen present CMM as a practical theory crafted to help make life better for real people in a real world.² Unlike some objective theorists, they don't claim to have discovered ironclad principles of communication that hold true for everyone in every situation. Instead, CMM consists of a set of concepts and models to help parents, therapists, social workers, mediators, teachers, managers, and others enhance their understanding and act more effectively in a wide range of communication situations. For its creators, the ultimate test of their theory is not one of "truth" in the sense of representing something accurately, but rather in the sense of beneficial consequences.³ They deem their theory successful when it helps create a higher quality of life.

CMM IN ACTION—STORIES FROM THE FIELD

I've paraphrased three brief reports from CMM advocates so that you can catch a glimpse of their theory in practice. These first-person narratives provide a context for you to understand Pearce and Cronen's coordinated management of meaning and the reason they chose that title. Throughout the chapter I'll refer back to these

stories to illustrate some of the analytical tools that CMM practitioners use as they try to construct a more supportive social environment.

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 attend 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 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

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

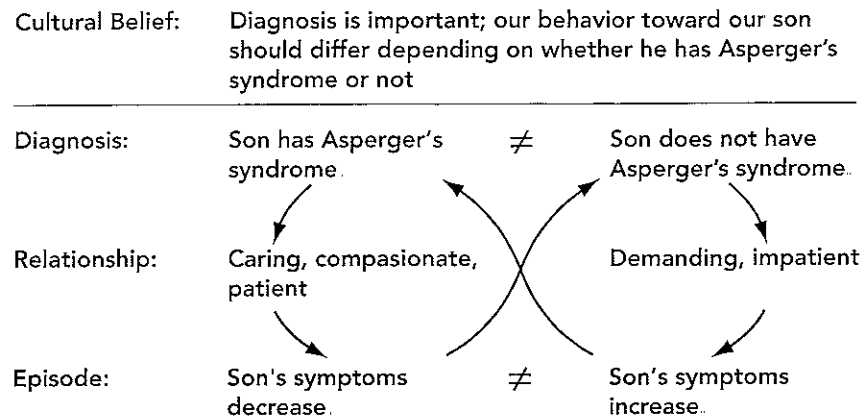


FIGURE 5-1 A Strange Loop of Diagnosis and Behavior

(Courtesy of W. Barnett Pearce.)

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 5-1). 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.

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.⁵

Cupertino Community Project

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

In 1996, the Public Dialogue Consortium⁶ 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 manner 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 from the Public Dialogue Consortium.⁷ 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 interventions. 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.⁸

PERSONS-IN-CONVERSATION: CREATING BONDS OF UNION

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.**

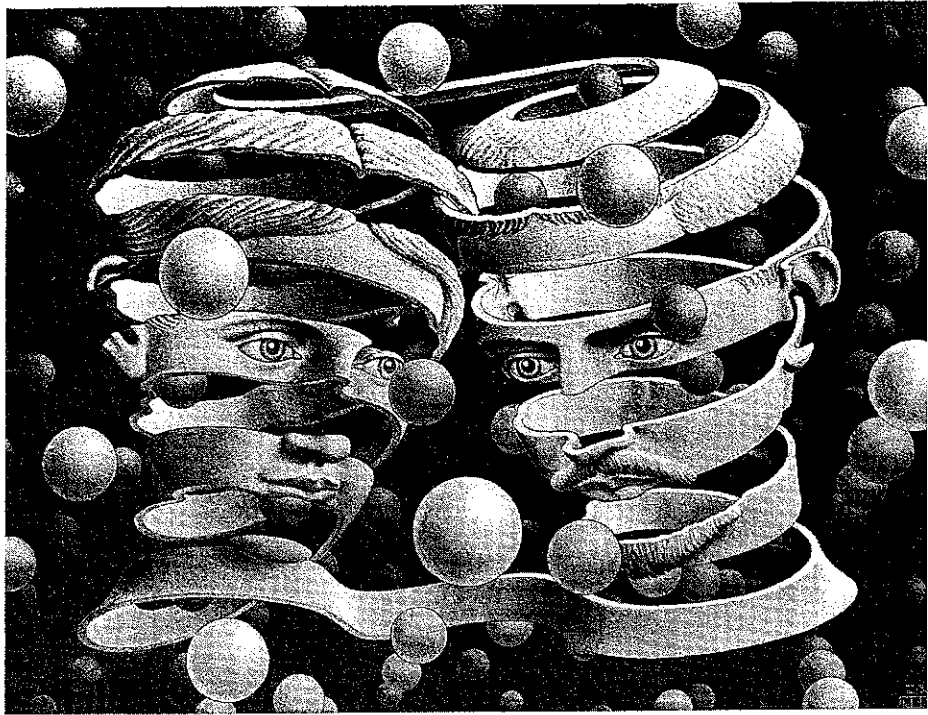


FIGURE 5-2 M. C. Escher's *Bond of Union*

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Figure 5-2 presents artist M. C. Escher's 1955 lithograph *Bond of Union*, which is a striking picture of 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."⁹ He sees the ribbon in Escher's drawing as representing the process of communication. It isn't just one of the activities the pair does or a tool that they use to achieve some other end. On the contrary, their communication literally forms who they are and creates their relationship. The 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.¹⁰

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,"¹¹ 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.¹²

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. 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.

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. The endless ribbon in *Bond of Union* loops back to reform 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?"

Escher's spheres suspended in space can be seen as worlds or planets of the external 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 Bangkok, Bucharest, and Mexico City 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 5-2 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 *pluralistic worlds* 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 4). 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 on the shape of story.

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 of action. 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 lower limits on what he can do. This tension is why Pearce and Cronen call their theory the *management of meaning*; we have 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, they want to help people interpret what's said and coordinate what's done so that the social environment they create is one in which they can survive and thrive. They 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.

Bringing Coherence to 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 5-3, 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*.

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 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 *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 that we rank order their importance for interpreting a given *speech act*.

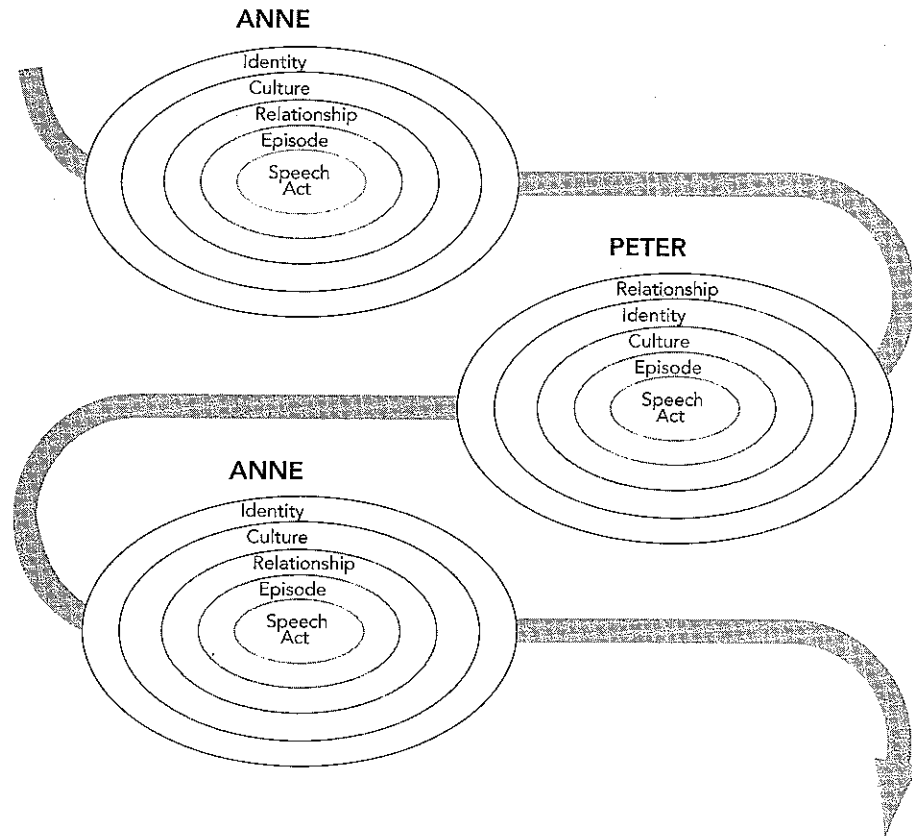


FIGURE 5-3 Hierarchical-Serpentine Model.

For example, consider the way that 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 the 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 account of Anne's betrayal during their court-appointed mediation.

Episode. An episode is a communication routine that has boundaries and rules—a recurrent language game. 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 neither Peter nor Anne moved from their original positions suggests that this episode in their lives had little significance for either of them.

Relationship. 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. 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 achieve coherence with anyone who hasn't grown up in 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 5-3 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 en-

compasses 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 5-3. 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 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. Coherence is possible only when we perceive the flow of conversation.

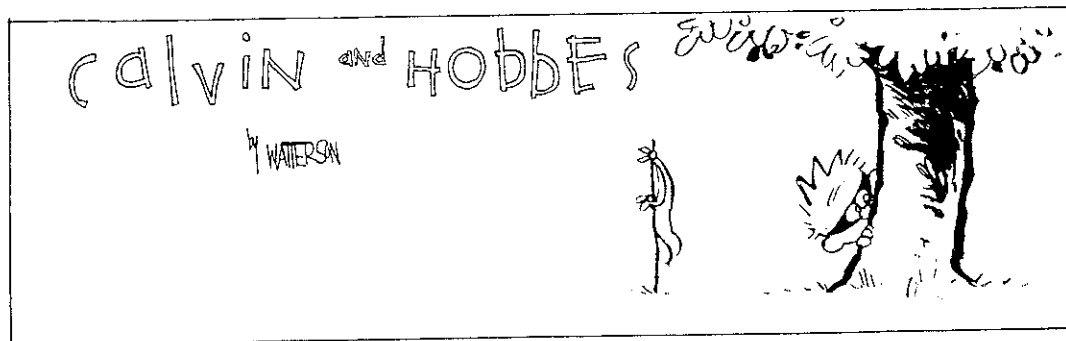
Do you get the impression from the hierarchical-serpentine model that even a brief conversation is a process that's incredibly complex and open-ended? If so, Pearce would be pleased. He thinks it's impossible to explain in a simple declarative sentence what a statement means—even when it's your own statement. 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

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 achieve coherence in 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 next page suggests, parties can coordinate effectively without much mutual understanding.

Like many other students of communication, CMM theorists enjoy reading descriptions of the rules for meaning and action in families, organizations, and cultures (see Chapters 12, 19, 20, and 33). In light of these descriptions of how real groups of people coordinate their behavior, "CalvinBall" no longer looks so strange.

CMM began as an interpretive theory, its authors attempting to describe and understand recurring patterns of communication.¹⁹ As the theory evolved, however, it developed a critical edge. 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.

As a case in point, 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 President George W. Bush labeled the "war on terror" is reproduced and sustained by patterns of communication that dismiss and demonize the other.²² For example, the way President Bush responded to the 9/11 attacks set in motion a sequence of events that have affected us all. In the conflict between al-Qaeda and the United States, *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. In an attempt to show another way of responding, Pearce wrote an alternative version of the speech that the President made to the nation on the night of the attack. One 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.²³

DIALOGIC COMMUNICATION: A NEW WAY TO TALK WITH OTHERS

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.²⁴ Over the last two decades Pearce has used a number of terms to describe the communication style that he values. He started by calling it *cosmopolitan communication*.²⁵ 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.

Although he still likes the concept of cosmopolitan communication, Pearce has lately used the term *dialogue* in the same way that Jewish philosopher Martin Buber does—to describe the optimum form of interpersonal relationships. (See p. 241 for an ethical reflection on Buber's dialogic view.) For Buber, *dialogic communication* "involves remaining in the tension between holding our own perspective while being profoundly open to the other."²⁶ 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.²⁷

In the hierarchical-serpentine model displayed in Figure 5-3, Pearce would picture a pair who are communicating dialogically as holding an equal concern for their own *identities* and the *relationship* between them. He might resort to computer art to capture the tension between matters of "I" and "we" that each person experiences. Perhaps two same-sized, superimposed ovals that reciprocally expand and contract would best show that neither concern for self nor concern for relationship becomes fixed as the context for the other. Pearce calls this transformation a *charmed loop*, as opposed to a *strange loop*, which locks parties into behaviors that no one really wants.²⁸

Figure 5-4 is an edited portion of an online exchange between a businessman and a professor on the subject of dialogue. Pearce notes that the businessman's frustration expressed in his first message strongly destabilized the balance that's necessary for dialogic communication. He treated his identity as a much more important context than he did their relationship. Had the professor "flamed" him back, the relationship would probably have shattered and both parties would have felt demeaned, yet the professor didn't respond in kind. He apologized, explained, asserted his own identity, and finally offered a new frame in which both parties were honored. The businessman's second message stabilized their relationship as dialogic. For the rest of the interchange, they each held mutual concerns for self and other. This reestablished relationship gives credence to Pearce's claim that when people are open rather than cynical toward the possibility of dialogic communication, this new way of talking is learnable, teachable, and contagious.

CRITIQUE: WHAT DOES THE LANGUAGE OF CMM CREATE FOR YOU?

There's a professor at the college where I teach who gives one-question essay exams. Students are fond of characterizing their breadth: "Describe how the universe works. Use examples." Pearce and Cronen's coordinated management of meaning reads like an answer to that question. They've crafted an impressive macrotheory of face-to-face communication, yet the very scope of the theory makes its core ideas difficult to pin down.²⁹

Perhaps Pearce and Cronen make comprehension more difficult by not being consistent in how they define their terms or in the way they state their claims. For example, they sometimes use the word *coherence* to label the process of people

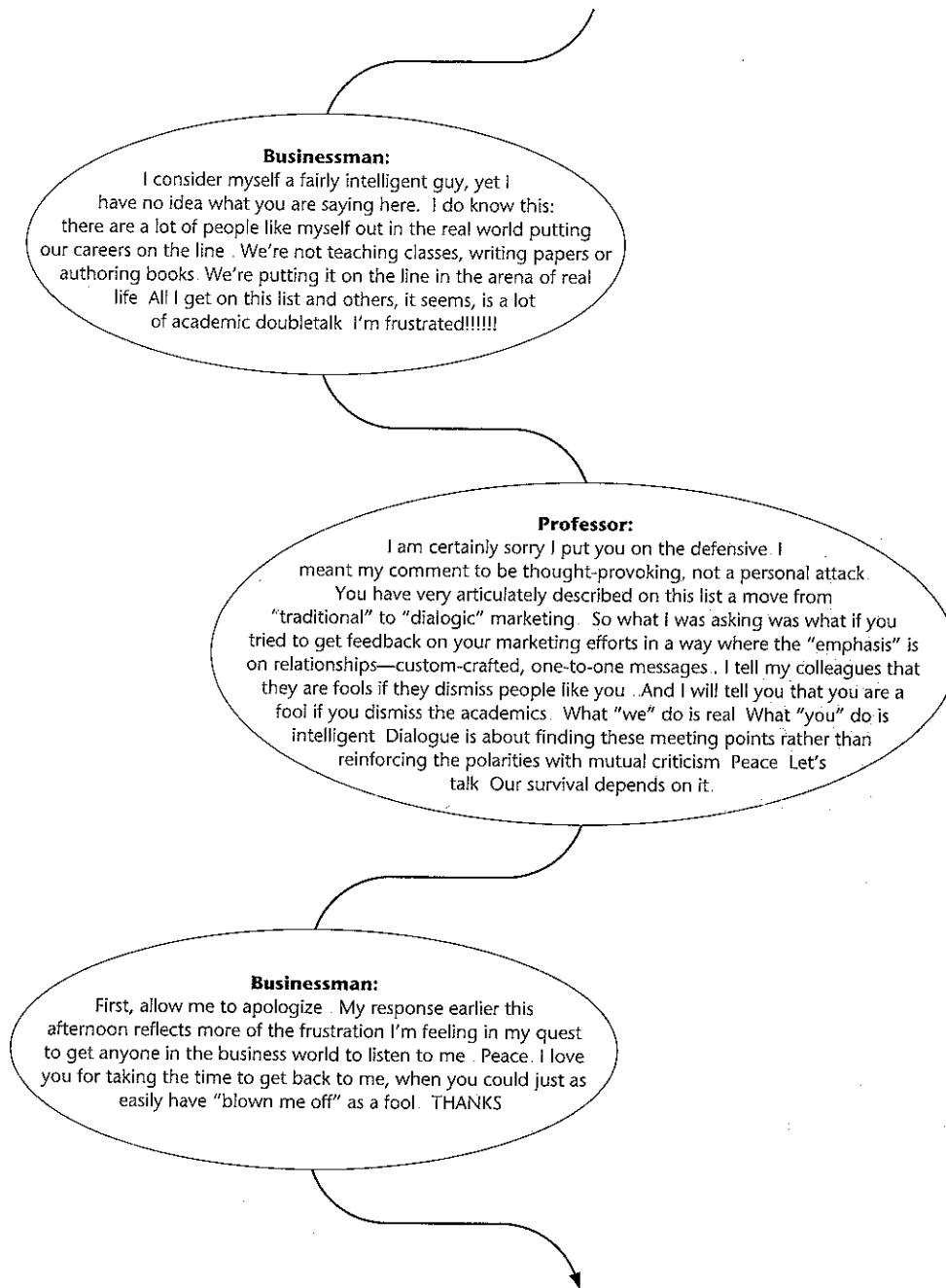


FIGURE 5-4 Example of Dialogic Communication

(Excerpted from W. Barnett Pearce and Kimberly A. Pearce, "Combining Passions and Abilities: Toward Dialogic Virtuosity")

making sense of their own stories lived. Yet in other cases, the theorists use the term to refer to persons-in-conversation sharing a common interpretation of their social universe—a meeting of minds. As Pearce wryly admits, “social constructionism scarcely suffers from overly-precise definitions”³⁰

When Pearce asked long-time 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)³¹

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. You haven’t read about constitutive rules, regulative rules, reconstructed contexts, gamemastery, grammars, the daisy model, or the LUUUTI model—just to name a few.

What I have stressed is Pearce and Cronen’s rock solid belief that persons-in-conversation co-construct their social realities. While many theorists today hold that the joint use of language creates, shapes, and limits the diverse social worlds in which we live, the coordinated management of meaning is the most comprehensive statement of social construction crafted by communication scholars. Your evaluation of CMM’s worth will ultimately hinge on whether or not you share their worldview. Therefore, I urge you to think through your answer to question #1 in the following “Questions to Sharpen Your Focus.”

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. *Social constructionists* see themselves as curious participants in a pluralistic world. Are you willing not to search 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 President Bush delivered the speech Pearce wrote after the 9/11 attack? What aspects of *dialogic communication* do you see in Pearce's version?

SELF-QUIZ


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CONVERSATIONS



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segment on
the book's CD

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, "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

Social constructionism: W. Barnett Pearce, "A Sailing Guide for Social Constructionists," in *Social Approaches to Communication*, Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz (ed.), Guilford, New York, 1995, pp. 88–113.

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.

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; also www.cios.org/www/opentext.htm

Research review of CMM: J Kevin Barge and W Barnett Pearce, "A Reconnaissance of CMM Research," *Human Systems*, Vol 15, 2004, pp. 193–203; also www.cios.org/www/opentext.htm

For scenes from feature films that illustrate CMM,
visit the movie clips section of
www.afirstlook.com