

# INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Making Social Worlds

W. BARNETT PEARCE



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*Making Social Worlds*

**W. Barnett Pearce**

Loyola University of Chicago

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# PREFACE

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*Interpersonal Communication: Making Social Worlds* is a textbook for college and university courses in interpersonal communication. These are very popular courses, but their popularity does not derive from a consensus on how they should be taught. Fifteen years ago, my survey of the field found three very different clusters of textbooks and related research programs. I called them the “objective scientific,” “humanistic celebration,” and “humane scientific” approaches (Pearce 1977). Although the field has developed in the intervening years, considerable diversity in the way this course is taught still remains. One index of the lack of consensus is found in bibliographies. Boynton-Trigg’s (1991) survey of five leading textbooks in interpersonal communication found that although a total of 336 authors were cited, only two—Mark Knapp and Paul Watzlawick—were cited in all five textbooks.

I set my hand to the task of writing another textbook with the explicit understanding that it would not be “just another textbook.” I wanted to make a contribution to the materials available for teaching interpersonal communication, and I had two choices: to write an integrative textbook including *all* the topics taught under the rubric of interpersonal communication, or to write a distinctive book that takes what I consider to be the most powerful concepts in the field and makes them available for students. I chose to do the latter; if I have succeeded, *Interpersonal Communication: Making Social Worlds* is conceptually distinctive, pedagogically rich and “user friendly.”

## ***The Conceptual Orientation***

This book is written from the “social constructionist” approach to interpersonal communication. The body of work known as the “coordinated management of meaning” is the supportive infrastructure of this book, and is located in the larger context of systems theory (as articulated by Gregory Bateson and his intellectual heirs); language-game analysis (as developed from Ludwig Wittgenstein by Rom Harré, John Shotter, Ken Gergen, and others); the American Pragmatists (chiefly William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, as they have been interpreted by Richard Bernstein, Giles Gunn, and Richard Rorty); the symbolic analysis of Kenneth Burke (as it has influenced a generation of scholars); and contemporary ethnographic research

(after the manner of Clifford Geertz, Harold Garfinkel, and Erving Goffman). My appropriation of all of these into a communication theory, particularly a theory of interpersonal communication, was done as part of a loosely bound group and in (sometimes intense) dialogue with communication theorists whose work focuses on interpersonal, intercultural, mass-mediated, and rhetorical communication.

The social constructionist approach thematizes interpersonal communication in a distinctive manner. The “process” of communication per se—an undulating, co-constructed activity of conversation—is emphasized; the various “products” of interpersonal communication are situated in that process. Traditional topics, such as intercultural communication, nonverbal communication, and self-disclosure are presented as part of an integrated analysis of conversation rather than as isolated variables or themes.

### *The Structure of the Book*

Each chapter includes three parts: “Narrative,” “Counterpoints,” and “Praxis.” These allow students to learn from complementary perspectives. “Narrative” sections provide information and concepts with which to think about interpersonal communication, “Counterpoints” provoke a playful peering around the corners of taken-for-granted assumptions, and “Praxis” sections structure activities in which students can learn from encountering the stuff of interpersonal communication. These sections do not duplicate each other. In fact, they are not always consistent: the tensions between exposition, provocation, and participation are the sites in which learning about interpersonal communication takes place.

The “Narrative” sections are the most familiar; they are straightforward expositions of information about interpersonal communication. This material is didactic, allowing students to learn by remembering what they read. Of the three types of material, this is the one about which I am most ambivalent. Straightforward expositions are the most effective way of teaching students who are highly motivated and who are appropriately focused. However, it is the least effective way of learning about interpersonal communication.

While Dean of the Annenberg School of Communication, George Gerbner noted that universities developed in a context best described as “informationally deprived.” Students would leave their homes and go to colleges that were oases of information and intellection. Libraries and lecturers were appropriately seen as repositories of the accumulated information of the culture, and education was primarily a matter of access to those resources. This hardly describes the contemporary scene; Gerbner described ours as an “information-saturated” society. To avoid being swamped by information, our students have developed sophisticated skills in disattending to informa-



tion; the college classroom often fares poorly in competition with the entertaining presentation of information in films, television, specialty magazines, and conventions of hobbyists or fans. The narrative description of interpersonal communication must be very good indeed to rival that provided in soap operas, serious films, *Nova* presentations, and an increasingly sophisticated street wisdom in which gangs, drugs, sex, and racial prejudice are a part of the overt consciousness of students. Because the “Narrative” sections must compare unfavorably with the production values of *MTV* and the marketing strategies of specialty magazines or narrowly cast electronic publications, the “Counterpoint” sections are included to exploit the potential of a printed textbook and the “Praxis” sections to exploit the resources of a college classroom.

“Counterpoints” comprise the second type of material in *Interpersonal Communication: Making Social Worlds*. Print remains the best medium for stimulating reflective, analytical thought. Inserted into the “Narratives” but distinguished from them by being enclosed in boxes, these materials include provocations, commentary, invitations to shift perspectives, metacommunication, and the literary equivalent to theatrical asides in which I “break character” as author and speak directly to the reader. Some are thought-provoking quotations or questions; some are simply bits of information or ideas that I want to call to students’ attention; some are conundrums that perplex me; but all are intended to develop that serious but slightly irreverent attitude toward the “Narrative” that is the precondition for reflective, analytical thought.

The importance of an irreverent, playful mindset cannot be over stressed. Interpersonal communication is a fluid, contingent, unfinished process in which we participate from a perspective more like that of the paddler of a canoe on a whitewater river than that of a cartographer mapping the river’s course; from a perspective more like that of a boxer whose chin has suddenly encountered the fist of his opponent than that of a celebrity television announcer. Our knowledge and participation in such a process from such a perspective requires a good bit of playfulness or at least intellectual athleticism. Much of the material in the “Counterpoints” consists of conceptual agility drills; limbering exercises for the mind that enable more flexible practice of interpersonal communication.

The “Praxis” sections comprise the third and most distinctive feature of the book. These are activities that I urge students to do, usually in groups and generally in class. I do not view these as a supplement to the text; to the contrary, these activities are the site where the most effective and valuable learning will take place. The activities are closely tied to the concepts presented in the “Narrative” and “Counterpoint” sections, but if one were forced to choose among them, I think that a student would learn more about interpersonal communication from participating in the praxis activities than from reading (and passing an examination on) the “narrative.”

## ***Differentiating Kinds of Knowledge***

I am committed to “participatory learning” in interpersonal communication not because of personal preference but because that is what my analysis of interpersonal communication requires. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle differentiated *theoria* (spectator knowledge), *poesis* (knowledge of techniques), and *praxis* (good judgment, or practical wisdom). Each of these ways of knowing are appropriate for a particular category of events. *Theoria* is appropriate for eternal, immutable objects; *poesis*, for repetitive, rote performances; and *praxis*, for things that are contingent. Contingent things, in Aristotle’s words, are those that could be other than what they are. Politics, public speaking, and household management, according to Aristotle, are included in the domain of *praxis* because they are contingent.

Interpersonal communication is clearly part of *praxis*; every conversation in which we participate *could* be (or has been) something other than it is (or was). If we had done *this* rather than *that*, then she would have done *that* rather than *this*, and our lives would have been different. This is the *form* of knowledge about interpersonal communication: it is contingent, uncertain, temporal, and from a first-person perspective. The next time we meet, so our knowledge goes, if I do *this* rather than what she expects me to do, then she may do *that*, which opens up a space in which we can do *that* . . . and so on.

The kind of knowledge illustrated in the preceding paragraph has little to do with “facts” and, although it presumes a mastery of technique, it goes far beyond it. Aristotle used the term *phronesis* for the kind of knowledge that is useful in *praxis*: it has more to do with the skilled judgment of a virtuoso artist than with a list of facts; more with the “instinctive” performance of a dancer or ballplayer than with an encyclopedia of information; it is better “coached” than taught.

*Interpersonal Communication: Making Social Worlds* is explicitly committed to facilitating the development of *phronesis* in the students who use it. For that reason, it invites participation rather than prescribes formula; it probes, suggests, playfully nudges, as well as didactically sets forth the received wisdom. It will frustrate those—teachers and students—who seek to utter the last word about interpersonal communication; it will reward those who seek to explore, open up possibilities, and enhance their ability to appreciate beauty and goodness in the social worlds in which they live.

*Interpersonal Communication: Making Social Worlds* provides a rich array of materials for the instructor. At the same time, it is a demanding text. The instructor must decide how much to emphasize the didactic material in the “Narratives,” the metacommunication in the “Counterpoints,” and the activities in the “Praxis.” Some instructors will want to incorporate materials not covered in the textbook or to read further in social constructionist theory to lead critical discussions of the conceptual basis of the course. These topics,

as well as suggestions for syllabus preparation and evaluation, are discussed in the *Instructors' Manual*.

## ***Interpersonal Communication and "The Real World"***

Just as our social worlds must, *Interpersonal Communication: Making Social Worlds* deals with real-life, tough problems such as race, gender, class, injustice, and ideological oppression as they relate to interpersonal communication. Embedded in the description of the process of interpersonal communication is a treatment of the human life cycle. The forms and functions of interpersonal communication change as we mature; the challenges and resources available to us are not always the same. *Interpersonal Communication: Making Social Worlds* attempts to enable students of all races, ages, and social classes to identify their own positions within the matrix of conversations in their lives, and to understand that others occupy other positions.

This leads me to a final confession. For twenty-something years I have labored as a minor academic, trying to develop communication theory. Any sufficiently self-aware person must occasionally ask, "Why?" What deep psychosis or purpose impels one to labor long into nights better suited for feasting or sleeping? What unconscious attraction drags the attention again and again to the same phenomena when one could look elsewhere for novelty? Why continue to wrestle with language, imprisoning legions of words on ranks of pages and struggling to find new ways of putting things?

These dark musings are in the spirit of e.e. cummings' observation that

since feeling is first  
 who pays any attention  
 to the syntax of things  
 will never wholly kiss you;  
 . . .  
 for life's not a paragraph  
 and death i think is no parenthesis

Sometimes our students will ask, with fewer dark edges to their questions, "What will a course in interpersonal communication do for me?"

The answer that sustains me, and that I offer through this book to generations of students whom I will never see, is this. The study of interpersonal communication enhances our ability to appreciate beauty and goodness in the social worlds around us, it increases our ability to call into being patterns of social interaction that are good and beautiful, it empowers our ability to embrace the conditions of our lives playfully and thus transcend them, and in these ways, it enriches our lives and enhances our value as participants in our social worlds.



Because interpersonal communication is a form of *praxis*, it is best understood in terms of whether it is done well or poorly, and whether the patterns it produces are beautiful or ugly. There is far more than enough ugliness in the patterns of interpersonal communication that surround us, and the price that one pays for heightened ethical and aesthetic appreciation is a keener awareness of evil and ugliness. But if we are to avoid reproducing in our own lives variations of the same old reprehensible patterns we abhor, we must increase our *phronesis*.

The patterns of interpersonal communication in every social setting also contain beauty and goodness. Students who take seriously what is written here, and who engage with the questions and activities suggested in the text, will be better able to discern, appreciate, and create instances of such beauty.

## **Acknowledgments**

Many people have contributed to the production of this book; some have contributed far more than they knew. (Confidentially, that's the risk you take when you are in the presence of social theorists who regularly plagiarize daily life!) Citing them in this preface reflects much more heartfelt gratitude than might appear to be conveyed in a list of names.

Vernon Cronen, University of Massachusetts, has been my partner for nearly two decades as we have tried to develop a coherent set of thoughts around the metaphor of "coordinated management of meaning." His influence on this book far exceeds the number of times his name is cited; of course, he will think—probably correctly—that the book would be better were his influence even greater!

My most valuable learning experience during this past decade has been working with an international group of therapists, consultants, and researchers who have been heavily influenced by the work of Gregory Bateson. Among many others, they include Peter Lang, Susan Lang, Martin Little, and Marjorie Henry of the Kensington Consultation Centre (London); Gianfranco Cecchin and Luigi Boscolo of the Centro Milanese di Terapia della Famiglia; Anna Castellucci of the Ospedale psichiatrico "F. Rancati" di Bologna; Laura Fruggeri of the Università di Parma; Maurizio Marzari of the Università di Bologna; Dora Schnitman of the Fundacion Interfas (Buenos Aires); Elspeth McAdam of Bethel Hospital (Norwich); and Eduardo Villar C. of the Fundacion de Psicoanalisis y Psicoterapis (Bogotá).

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