

The possibility of critical dialogue in the theory of CMM

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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates how the Theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) is a communication theory with a critical edge. The critical function of CMM can be seen in how it employs systemic questions in critical dialogue. I begin with a discussion of the major thesis in critical cultural studies, the issue of power. I argue that through a skillful application of an array of systemic questions, CMM provides a viable framework to address the issues of power and privilege in social relations. Systemic questions are typically employed in community projects conducted by the Public Dialogue Consortium. The goals of critical dialogue within a CMM framework include: a) to elicit stories and different voices from the participants, b) to facilitate participants making structural connections between their own and others' stories, and c) to create a space for participants to see the critical relationship between their social position and the power, privilege, and social advantage associated with their social identity. Concepts in CMM such as reflexivity, logical force, and contextualized organization of meanings are particularly useful to analyze how critical dialogue in CMM can address power in communication.

Bob Dylan in his song "The Times They are a Changin'" warns his listeners not to "criticize what you can't understand." Although Dylan's lyrics pointed to parental ignorance of the younger generation's doings, the song inevitably reminds me of a common critique of the Theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) that I have encountered since I first studied with Pearce and Cronen in the late 1980's. More than a decade of study has given me the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of CMM as an interpretive theory with a critical edge. To me CMM is more than a communication theory; it is a way of seeing and experiencing the world. Given my involvement in the development of CMM and research interests in intercultural communication, I find myself in various scholarly conversations having to "defend" CMM to critical theorists who, like many others, may not have a good grasp of CMM and yet have no qualms about offering their criticism.

In this paper I respond to a commonly perceived weakness of CMM and argue that the issue of power does have a place in CMM research, and that engaging in critical dialogue from a systemic perspective is one way to demonstrate CMM's potential to encompass a critical edge in studying communication. Granted that insufficient attention has been paid to power in CMM studies, CMM theory should not be seen simply as an interpretive theory. From a pragmatist as well as systemic perspective, CMM investigates power by treating communication as the primary process that is constantly evolving instead of an abstract system of constructs.

In exploring the possibility of using CMM to study critical issues, I will first provide a partial rendition of the theory, highlighting only concepts that are most relevant to my subsequent discussion of critical dialogue. Second, I will outline major arguments in critical cultural studies,

focusing on the issue of power. This presentation sets up a context for examining CMM as a communication theory with a critical edge and the practice of critical dialogue. I will demonstrate how systemic questioning (see Spano, 2001; Pearce, 2002) is a viable protocol to explore issues of power and privilege.

Theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM)

CMM researchers pay special attention to the process of how we create social worlds together through conversations and activities (e.g., Cronen et al., 1989/90; Pearce 1994; Cronen & Lang, 1994; Pearce, 2002). As Cronen (1994, 1995) continues to remind us, communication is a systemic process and should be studied as such. An essential feature of the study of communication is praxis. Focusing on social activities allows us to acknowledge that communication is contingent and not fully predictable, that “things can be other than what they are” (Pearce, 1994, pp. 11-14). From a pragmatic perspective, research conducted in a CMM framework explores how language use creates patterns of interaction in a specific context, and how simultaneously our actions can become the context for interpreting our conversations and activities (see Pearce 1994; Pearce & Pearce, 2004). The statement “An act performed by a person also acts upon the person who performed it” (Pearce, 1994, p. 204) can best capture the spirit of this interdependent fluidity in social interaction.

The concept of reflexivity figures prominently in the theory of CMM. Reflexivity in the CMM tradition means more than a mere reflective consideration of a researcher’s own position when he/she analyzes the phenomenon being observed and studied. Nor should it be narrowly focused on the detailed self-revelation of the author in the recent trend of autoethnography. The statement “We act into a context” is at the heart of CMM, that each action both responds to and evokes others in a sequence of events (Pearce, 1994, p. 31). Shailor (1997) offers a thorough presentation of the meaning and use of “context” in CMM and states that the levels of meaning can be used as a “heuristic device to tease out the layers of narratives spoken by each person” (p. 102). In emphasizing communication as an act that simultaneously responds and elicits, Cronen *et al.* maintain (1989/90) that “We consider the co-evolution of action and context central to what meaning is all about, not peripheral to making a determination of meaning for a particular act” (p. 29). Giddens’ (1979) discussion of structuration and the notion of unintended consequences can best illustrate CMM’s position on the (re)constitutive and open ended process in communication as well as an infinite array of possible human actions.

A more complex understanding of reflexivity encourages us to pay attention to the reconstitution between any two levels of meanings in the model (e.g., between communication pattern and social relation, individual identity and episode, etc.). This theoretical emphasis enables CMM researchers to lean toward a certain kind of social technology that is grounded in practice. Circular questioning (Selvini Palazzoli *et al.*, 1980) commonly used in CMM research, specifically allows us to explore the (changing) grammar that guides both individual storytelling and relational construction. Individual’s grammar also simultaneously emerges as a result of social interaction, as “communication entails a reflexive relationship between structure and action” (Cronen

et al., 1988, p. 73). In recent CMM projects conducted by the Public Dialogue Consortium, “systemic questioning” is often used to emphasize the co-creation of meaning and patterns by all participants. Pearce’s notion of “conversational triplets” (Pearce, 1994, p. 121) illustrates the importance of treating antecedents, acts, and consequences in communication as sequentially and reflexively interrelated. “Circular questioning takes seriously the idea that life is lived in time” (Cronen, 1994, p. 193). From this perspective, it is clear that power within a system should not be treated as a given or any kind of static or reified structure. Power has no meaning other than how it is enacted, reinforced, challenged, and (re)constituted in people’s concrete actions. In other words, if we take the concept of reflexivity seriously, imposing the power structure on communication prior to our investigation seems inconsistent with a CMM approach.

A unique characteristic of CMM is that it is a practical theory (see Barge in this issue, Barge, 2001; Cronen, 2001; Pearce & Pearce, 2001; Spano, 2001). Grounded in concrete social praxis, CMM treats language as activity with the constructive power to make things happen. In other words, our thinking is constituted in the way we use language. “In CMM we talk about emotion and thinking as intrinsic aspects of person’s actions” (Cronen, 1994, p. 190). The question then becomes how arguments, policies, and interpersonal relationships are made in communication (Pearce & Pearce, 2004, p. 43). A social constructionist emphasis on persons-in-conversation gives CMM a unique potential to make changes in individual action and social practice. I will elaborate this later in the discussion of critical dialogue. I now move to highlight the issues of concern in critical cultural studies, and this part will provide the context for developing my subsequent arguments on the possibility of critical dialogue.

Critical cultural studies

Cultural studies attempts to “cut across diverse social and political interests and address many of the struggles within the current scene” (Grossberg et al., 1992, p.1). In the U.S. cultural studies has been in vogue among intercultural communication scholars. The rubric of cultural studies involves the study of culture that has been “loosely affixed to many kinds of enterprises, but it is the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham (founded in 1964) that adopted, constructed, and formalized the term cultural studies as a name for its own unique project” (Grossberg et al., 1992, pp. 8-9).

Research conducted from a cultural studies perspective can be found in Stuart Hall’s numerous writings on identity, representation, ideology, and power in media discourse (e.g., Hall, 1980, 1990a, 1990b, 1992, 1996; Hall & du Gay, 1996). Even though cultural studies “is not and has never been one thing” (Hall, 1990a, p. 11), Bennett believes that scholars who adopt this perspective share a commitment to “examining cultural practices from the point of view of their interaction with, and within, relations of power” (cited in Grossberg et al., 1992, p. 3). In other words, the central concern for cultural studies is to analyze relations of power and one’s place within them, taking into account historical forces that shape individual action and societal phenomena.

Cultural studies, therefore, takes a sociohistorical point of view to investigate the production of meaning on different levels of communication. It pays special attention to how individuals challenge a “structure in domination” through social struggle and resistance (see Hall, 1980; Grossberg, 1996; Halualani, 2002). This examination of the relationships between identity, social agency, and power focuses on social relations, practices, and experiences. As During (1993) argues, culture here is viewed “less as an expression of local communal lives linked to class identity and more as an apparatus within a large system of domination” (p. 5). Cultural studies thus offers “critiques of culture’s hegemonic effects” (p. 5).

Martin and Nakayama (2004) specifically apply this critical perspective in their study of intercultural communication. They consider broader social, political, and historical contexts when approaching intercultural communication, arguing that a critical perspective underscores the importance of power and historical context. Further, power relations in communication should be the focus of our inquiry, and identifying cultural differences is important only in relation to power differentials (pp. 58-59). Research questions articulated in cultural studies, therefore, include how power functions in social and political situations. With the assumption that research can help the average person learn how to resist forces of power and oppression, a variety of studies using cultural studies perspective can be found in [Readings in Intercultural Communication](#) (Martin et al, 2002).

Among others, communication scholars such as Lannamann (1996), Halualani (2002), Shome & Hegde (2002), and Carrillo Rowe (2004) have pointed out that studies in interpersonal and intercultural communication must address the issue of power. They maintain that critical research is concerned with whose voices are being heard, erased, dismissed, and privileged, whose history is being reflected, and whose language constitutes the dominant discourse. The issue of representation lies at the heart of cultural studies, and power relations in society undoubtedly mediate the space and perspective for the nature of that representation. Spivak’s (1982) work is particularly concerned with “speaking for” and “speaking as” and the “unauthenticities that this process entails” (Spivak & Gunew, 1993, p. 193). In discussing questions of multiculturalism, Spivak says “For me, the question ‘who should speak?’ is less crucial than ‘who will listen?’” (Spivak & Gunew, p. 194). The real demand she notes is that, “when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously; not with that kind of benevolent imperialism, really, which simply says that because I happen to be an Indian or whatever” (p. 194). The idea of social positionality informs us that different kinds of consciousness are produced by and would lead to different social experiences and positions (Hall, 1996). This positionality, of course, involves an ongoing negotiation of power in the process of communication. It is not a static fixed point but changes according to the cultural and historical condition.

CMM with a critical edge

Given my discussion of CMM and critical cultural studies, it would be too simplistic to conclude that cultural studies treats power at the center of its inquiry, and CMM is not interested in power relation because it does not explicitly adopt the typical rhetoric used in critical theory. My

main point here is that CMM studies human interaction by attending to social conversations and activities in which power is constituted, displayed and performed, and therefore made real. Certain CMM work (see Cronen, et al., 1988; Cronen, 1994) specifically examines a form of individuality that cannot recognize the social basis of its production and attends to the practices that create and reconstitute one's identity. We can see that this kind of CMM studies are implicitly critical in that they investigate the dominant structure that gives meaning to individual voices.

In the language of CMM, power relations become real and power differentials emerge as participants make sense of their experience. A crucial difference between these two perspectives is that whereas cultural studies demands changes by highlighting the system that oppresses, suppresses, or homogenizes, CMM does not impose this type of socially constructed knowledge on the phenomenon being studied. Rather, it focuses on "the possibilities for enhancing the conditions of human life" (Cronen, et al., 1988, p. 68) by foregrounding communication instead of power. In this sense CMM is intended to function as a "lens through which the social world can be interpreted and critiqued" (Cronen, et al., 1988, p. 70).

What makes CMM a unique theory is an essential engagement with the idea of reflexivity in every aspect of the research. As Cronen et al. (1988) state, "CMM seeks to generate an illuminating critique of cultural practices, including the researchers' own" (p. 68). Even though Grossberg et al. (1992) claim that "in cultural studies, the politics of the analysis and the politics of intellectual work are inseparable" (p. 7), CMM takes the argument that research is social intervention even more seriously (McNamee, 1988). As a practical theory, CMM recognizes that developing theory is itself a practice, and the reflexive connection between theory and practice needs to be acknowledged and lived, not merely theoretically articulated. Recent CMM work on public dialogue can best serve as an example to illustrate this point. As a practical theory, the interpretive power of CMM ultimately ought to serve the critical interest. The challenge for CMM researchers then becomes how we can study the ideological process of identity or positionality construction when the contestation of power and authority within a system is always evolving. If our talk and action are indeed shaped by specific manifestations of power and domination, as Lannamann (1995) points out, how do we study the power structure that is reflexively constructed in the way we communicate? How do we give voices to the oppressed in a CMM study so our work really makes a difference in the system that we are critiquing? How do we offer a CMM analysis when certain rules are privileged but invisible, and furthermore, the structure makes the rules inarticulable?

Critical theorist Michel Foucault, in an interview with anthropologist Paul Rabinow, points out that "abstract (and in the West highly valued) words like liberty and rationality refer neither simply to ideas nor to practices—but to sets of complex exchanges between the two. Nonetheless, it has been the practices of liberty and reason that have been neglected by intellectual and cultural historians" (Foucault, 1993, p. 161). Reflecting a systemic thinking, Foucault further maintains that "What is interesting is always interconnection, not the primary of this over that, which never has any meaning" (p. 169).

Similar to CMM, cultural studies believes that its practice does matter, that its own intellectual work is supposed to and can make a difference. Granted that oppression or cultural imperialism is something that most scholars would fight against if recognized, it is not clear exactly what methodology cultural studies proposes to study the cherished topics of their concern and to make changes in the system. As During (1993) states, "Cultural studies is not an academic discipline quite like others. It possesses neither a well-defined methodology nor clearly demarcated fields for investigation" (p. 1). Martin and Nakayama (2004) also acknowledge the limitations of using cultural studies in communication studies: "Most cultural studies do not focus on face-to-face intercultural interaction but on forms of media forms of communication" (p. 62).

In light of the methodological critique of cultural studies, CMM, as a practical theory, promotes a vision of grounding theory in a situationally and relationally meaningful practice and allowing a reflexive interplay between the two. A serious acknowledgment of the intrinsic relevance between theory and practice thus demands a viable method to investigate power in a specific social context. It also requires us to examine how social meaning and action are reconstituted in the larger system and vice versa. As Cronen (1994) said, "Those of us who work with CMM theory are very concerned that social theory reclaim its right to a public, critical voice" (p. 204). Systemic questioning is a viable and sophisticated protocol for such purpose.

The possibility of critical dialogue in CMM

Systemic questions have been discussed and used in various therapeutic interventions as well as in communication studies for nearly three decades. Recent work on public dialogue from a CMM perspective specifically employs systemic questioning in projects designed to improve the quality of communication (see Pearce & Pearce, 1998; Pearce & Pearce, 2000a; Pearce & Pearce, 2000b; Pearce & Pearce, 2001, Spano, 2001; Pearce & Pearce, 2004). Spano's (2001) work on the Cupertino Community Project is an example of how participatory democracy can be created through a series of public dialogue events that were designed for the citizens to discuss difficult and sensitive topics in their community. The Public Dialogue Consortium (PDC) that collaborated with the Cupertino residents used systemic questioning as a way to invite the participants to a) listen to and engage with others' stories, b) make connections between different individuals' histories and experiences, c) reflect upon and challenge the grammar of their own stories and others' stories, and d) work on the possibility of change with the guidance of the CVA model--concerns, visions, actions (See Spano, pp. 38-44; Pearce, 2002, p. 40). Even though the Cupertino Community Project did not specifically focus on the interrogation of power per se, I argue that there is much potential in using systemic questioning as a critical protocol to explore issues of power, identity, and difference. If conducted skillfully and effectively, an array of systemic questions can provide a way to explore power dynamics as constructed in the stories told by participants. This inquiry does not necessarily require an expert's insight into the power structure of the community. Neither does the success of a dialogue event depend on highlighting the dominant/subordinate relationship or the oppressed condition of the powerless. Rather, through an ongoing invitation of storytelling, listening, questioning, challenging and reflecting

on the grammar, participants gradually become aware of the social position they occupy, along with the degree and type of power and privilege that come with their position. Here I offer an example of how systemic questioning worked in a dialogue facilitation I conducted during the Town Hall Meeting in Cupertino (see Spano, pp. 102-119). I was the facilitator at a table of five Cupertino residents, of which two were Americans of European descent and three were Asian Americans. The issue under discussion was the changing ethnic composition in Cupertino, and the challenges in communication in the face of the newly arrived Asian immigrants. The following is a reconstructed dialogue between a man of European descent (M) and a second-generation Chinese American woman (W), with me as the facilitator (F):

M: Sometimes it's hard for us to understand their (the new immigrants') language and customs. I really think it's their responsibility to learn English so they can get assimilated into the American society.

W: Well, my father first came to the States in the early 50's. He was in Philadelphia working in a restaurant, and things were hard for him. They spoke Cantonese where he worked. It was not easy for him to learn English.

F (to W): I'm curious, what were some of your father's stories as a Chinese immigrant in the 50's?

W (laughing): Oh it was nothing like what we have in Cupertino. There were not a lot of Chinese people around, and Americans didn't respect them because they weren't holding any prestige jobs or anything like that, you know. They were just working people... and I guess foreigners too. I think the first generation of immigrants were really brave

F (to W): Yes, I'm sure things were quite different back then. (Turning to M) When did your family come to this country?

M: Oh, it was long time ago, in the 1800's. They came from England.

F (to M): So do you have stories about your family that are similar to what you've just heard?

M: Let's see... Well, I don't really know much about my family's history, but things must have been hard for them too. You know, nobody had money back in those days.

F (to M): Did they also have to learn a new language like W's father did?

M: Oh no, everybody spoke English. So I guess in that regard things were easier for my family.

F (to M): And were they treated as foreigners too?

M: (hesitating) Well, I'm not sure, but I wouldn't think so... They were just immigrants.

F (to W): Who are considered as foreigners in Cupertino?

W: I think Asian immigrants are always considered as outsiders; it doesn't matter how

long they've been here.

F (to M): Is this something you have to worry about?

M: Not really.

The subsequent conversation at the table involved further storytelling by other participants who related different kinds of challenges faced by family members when they first came to the U.S. I employed an array of systemic questions in conjunction with the CVA model and Appreciative Inquiry to encourage the participants to reflect upon such things as 1) how their social positions differ in this society, 2) their unique personal experiences, 3) connections (or not) between their stories, and 4) possibilities for the future of their community. Examples of the systemic questions I posed include "How do you relate to the story you've just heard?" "Who else would tell a similar story and who would tell a different story?" "Whose voices do you hear as you listen to W's story?" "Do you think the story M told reflects a *normal* immigrant experience?" "How is your experience similar or different?" "What do you think Cupertino residents can and cannot do to build better communication?" "What do you and don't you like about the new comers in Cupertino?" "Who has a voice and who doesn't in this community?" "Whose responsibility is it to help the new immigrants become acculturated?" "What would happen if everyone in the community takes an active role in explaining American customs to the new comers?" "How would things be different if old residents make the effort to learn new immigrants' language and their cultural practices?" "How would your life be different if the *problems* that are associated with the new residents or the old residents disappeared?" "Who has the most difficult time with these *problems*?"

The enlivened expression on M's face when he recalled his family's experience suggests that he appreciated the opportunity to share his personal stories as well, especially when there was so much focus on the new immigrants' experience at the meeting. Having a chance to listen to others' stories in a public setting and reflect on how differently individuals live the American "immigrant's life" fostered his understanding that he belongs to a social category that is endowed with power and privilege in this society. The end of the extract suggests that M became aware of the unequal treatment between W's father and his own ancestor, both first generation immigrants to this country. It seems that M was almost surprised to hear something that is so familiar in W's experience (being born here but treated as a foreigner). I believe that in this facilitated comparison, along with the subsequent exchanges, it would be difficult for M not to see the privilege and social advantage that he has simply as a result of belonging to the social category of a white American. By the end of this dialogue session, my series of systemic questioning gave him an opening to engage in a critical understanding of the dynamics of immigrant interaction in Cupertino. A difference was made through critical dialogue.

It is important to realize that in my example, each question may not be a systemic question on its own, but overall the inquiry promotes a systemic understanding of the issues in discussion. The purpose for posing an array of questions is to create a space where the participants can examine what they share in common as well as how different their social experiences are, as well as how

race, ethnicity, language, class, and gender may mediate the way they live in the community and relate to others. This protocol embraces CMM's assumption that meaning emerges from social doing, that through participating in dialogue, participants can come to an understanding of the unequal treatment and evaluation of different groups, and the different amount of resources, social status, abilities, and power that they have as they join the community. Through listening to other people's stories and providing thoughtful responses to the questions posed, the participants are encouraged to see that despite the popular rhetoric of diversity, "differences" often are not equally valued or necessarily treated with equal respect and significance among different groups; some are more privileged in a particular context than others due to a variety of reasons.

Critical cultural analyses have argued that white Euro-Americans generally have certain social advantages and privileges over non-white persons because "whiteness" as a social category—not necessarily as an individual case—confers power and privilege throughout U.S. history (see Johnson, 2001; McIntosh, 2001; Jensen, 2003). Cultural studies is concerned with "cultural Othering" (see Halualani, 2002), the construction and representation of the center or norm in relation to that which is marginalized. Systemic questioning provides a range of possibilities to explore the evolving positions and borders between the center and the peripheral. Participating in critical dialogue allows the participants to reflect upon the kind of power that they see themselves having (or not) in terms of generating change. A CMM understanding cautions us to be mindful of the "different ways to *go on* in social situations from different positions with respect to a system" (Cronen, et al., 1989/90, p. 35). Even more importantly, it suggests that one's "position" should be grounded in lived experience. Through a critical process of sharing stories, individuals are encouraged to see the role their specific identities play in structuring their personal experience and social interaction.

Dialogue is a useful vehicle to elicit a broad spectrum of stories, each with its unique grammar. Critical dialogue carries the task further by asking the question "What do we do with the collection of stories after we hear them?" Critical dialogue does not erase or dismiss important differences between individuals by relying on clichés such as "people are *just* different" or "We just need to learn how to respect and appreciate our differences." Cornel West's (1993) work on "culture of difference" cautions us to avoid the reductive ways of thinking that endanger such work; "We should not lose touch with the complexities of thought and action in the world" (p. 203). The challenge for us is how to recognize and be cognizant of complexities and reflexivity when we conduct a CMM analysis. A critical way to reconstruct the notion of any kind of difference obligates us to think of difference as a relational construct. From what point of view is the difference being constructed? For whom does the difference matter? What is the taken-for-granted perspective (the dominant way) that is being used in comparison of differences? Who has the power to define the difference for others? Who benefits from this definition? Since difference has no significance in and of itself, the important point is how we talk about and relate to other's difference. How do we choose to highlight or downplay our own and other's difference? How do we treat our own and other's difference with what consequences? A CMM framework facilitates our examination of the reflexive connections between power and action in light of a systemic

understanding of difference. Derrida (1978) challenges us to study difference when he argues that in order for the center to emerge, other voices have to be marginalized. In other words, the visible and dominant narratives often emerge at the expense of the powerless ones. How then do we study the process in which the center displaces the peripheral and the powerful stories triumph over the weak ones?

I do not think most CMM scholars would disagree with cultural studies in that power is an essential construct to take into account when explaining individual actions, social relationships, and communication patterns. The unique contribution of CMM theory lies in its practical application, as illustrated in critical dialogue. CMM reminds us that power is never a given within a system; it is contextually co-created by all participants and fluidly constituted in our conversations and activities. The concept of logical force in CMM enables us to ask the question “Where and how do we locate a sense of oughtness for the actors to use power in order to dominate, to relinquish power as a political strategy, or to perpetuate the power structure in their social interaction?” If power and authority are in constantly evolving contestation, as cultural studies asserts, then any intervention of power must involve a process, specifically, a process of doing. Through a series of systemic questioning, critical dialogue in a CMM framework can best explore and expose the fluid (but not arbitrary) construction of power in a situated relationship. By respecting and engaging with real people’s voices and stories, not the theorist’s intellectually privileged voice, CMM is useful for examining social situations in which unequal power relation creates tension in communication. Critical dialogue aims at changing the relationship between participants, rather than their positions, through systemic storytelling and questioning. Having a new understanding of their own and other’s positions and the roles they play in co-constructing each other’s position can engender transformation in communication.

CMM privileges the way people make sense of their experiences while understanding that the larger social, political, and historical structure is always mediating the way we assign meanings to our daily interaction. Studying CMM has provided me with guidance in my scholarly pursuit as well as community work, with the goal to make a positive difference in the system in which we live and to give voices to individuals who are disadvantaged and powerless. Critical cultural studies may provide an “obvious” way to critique the dominance and injustice that exist in a society and the various kinds of “isms” that oppress people and perpetuate the privilege and power of the ruling upper class. CMM shares the vision of a truly democratic society in which promoting equality should go beyond mere theoretical exposition. The challenge for facilitating critical dialogue goes beyond merely providing a public forum and allowing different voices to be heard. How do we critically make sense of stories that are incommensurate? What is our next move? What do we do with the silence once it is publicly heard? Pursuing this kind of questions encourages us to engage in critical articulation of both the process and the content. From a cultural studies perspective, the dialogue projects accomplished with the guidance of CMM theory (see Pearce, 2002) may seem too “soft” in terms of addressing the issue of power. To respond to this criticism, we may need a different set of criteria to assess the accomplishment of dialogue projects (see Chen & Pearce, 1995). The easy dismissal of CMM’s unique potential

to investigate critical issues also reminds me of a story. A centipede and a snail are getting together for a pizza party. They have ordered a pepperoni pizza from a pizza parlor that does not deliver and are therefore trying to decide who should go pick up the pizza. After a careful deliberation, they agree that since the snail is a little slower, the centipede is the most obvious choice to undertake the task. So off the centipede goes to pick up the pizza. As the time goes by, the snail grows impatient with anticipation for the delicious pizza. After an hour has gone by, he can wait no more. The snail decides to head for the pizza parlor and fetch the pizza himself. As he opens the door, he sees the centipede on the porch still lacing up his shoes!

Indeed, sometimes we can be deceived by the most obvious solution. The most useful approach to accomplish a task may require sophistication that sees beyond the apparent. In my dialogue example, there were occasions when I could easily spot the elitist (if not racist) overtone of the Euro-American's comments. Instead of calling him on this or allowing others at the table to "label" him as a racist—which would be awkward and could lead to an unproductive confrontation—I chose to go with his stories and eventually was able to create an opportunity for him to question his grammar of the "immigrant."

Conclusion

Geuss (1981) in discussing the idea of a critical theory states that "Critical theories aim at emancipation and enlightenment, at making agents aware of hidden coercion, thereby freeing them from that coercion and putting them in a position to determine where their true interests lie" (p. 55). The nature of this theoretical inclination is such that it not only attempts to offer social agents an opportunity to see through their "entrapment" and "delusions" but also provides a means to critique the power relations within the system for the participants. Geuss also argues that "It (critical theory) doesn't merely give information about how it would be rational for agents to act if they had certain interests; it claims to inform them about what interests it is rational for them to have" (p. 58). Perhaps this is where CMM departs from traditional critical theory in its theoretical inclination. Black feminist theorist Barbara Christian (1988) observes that "People of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic...Our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddle and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking" (p. 68). It can be said that Christian's articulation of theory seems more to CMM's liking.

The starting point for CMM research is not an abstract exposition of how power relations are constituted in society. Instead, we foreground real conversations and activities that are performed by social agents in a relational context. Our knowledge of social injustice and oppression comes from a critical reflexive understanding of how participants create meanings in conjunction with others via social interaction. Although we recognize the role power plays in structuring our meaning and action, a CMM approach is more likely to let critical issues emerge from "empirical" data of lived experience.

In the spirit of CMM, I end this paper with a quote from Ursula LeGuin: "The only thing that

makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty; not knowing what comes next” (1976, p. 71). As a communication theory, CMM does not claim or aspire to be certain. Cronen (1994) insists that human communication is inherently imperfect. For a CMM researcher, perhaps this admission of the human condition is the ultimate manifestation of power in reflexivity.

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