

Embodying activism within the CMM ethos

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Activism goes so much to the heart of what CMM is all about and it goes so much to my own heart in all that I do. I have been what I would call an activist scholar for all of my adult life, being active in such disparate movements as feminism, law reform, environmentalism, welfare policy, indigenous issues, and even communication theory reform. As I thought about what I have done in these various arenas, I found myself reflecting on what I draw on from CMM to guide my activism—both as a change agent and a scholar—and how I embody CMM in doing so.

Many people seem to be drawn to CMM because of the models offered for understanding communication and the relationships between people and there is no doubt that these various models offer significant insight into the coordination, coherence and mystery of communication. However, for me, the far more important contribution is the broader framework, or ethos as I would like to call it, from which the various models emerged. In the spirit of our learning exchange I would like to offer my insights into this ethos in the hope they could be of some value to other activist scholars. For a more sustained, scholarly exposition you could read Penman (2014, 2000).

Some key features of the CMM ethos

A way of looking and being

I remember when I first met Barnett Pearce and Vern Cronen, the founders of CMM. It was at an ICA conference in Chicago in 1978 and it didn't take us very long at all to recognize we shared the same CMM ethos, although that isn't what we called it then. I imagine we would have talked about it (which we did for days and then over decades) as a different way of looking at communication. Rather than seeing communication as something ancillary or instrumental to all the juicy parts of life we were convinced then, and still are,

that it was the essence of all that mattered in our human social life (and perhaps even more than just the social—it was the essence of our humanity).

I cannot speak for Barnett or Vern about what led them to this view but I clearly remember mine began when I first asked myself the question: “what makes a good relationship?”. It seemed that the more I thought about this question and the more I followed through on the implications, the more it became blatantly obvious to me that the only way I could explore this question as a researcher was to look at communication. How else to understand a relationship but to look at what went on between people? I could ask them questions in the abstract but that actually took me at least one step away from the relationship per se. It was at this point that I realized it is the very process of communication that is our primary “data source” as it were, or to use Vern’s terms, it is the only real empirical data available to us—everything else is one or more steps removed

Various philosophical traditions, such as those based on Heidegger (Stewart, 1995) and Dewey (1981), can be drawn on to elaborate this understanding of the primary role of communication: that we live in communication and it is our primary human reality. Within CMM this understanding of communication as material, as mattering in its own right, and as doing so importantly, has come to be called the “communication perspective”. However, while this phrase—a “communication perspective”—does capture the CMM ethos, of late I have started to wonder whether it is also a bit misleading. When we use the word “perspective” we can readily accept that we are talking about looking and, in the instance of CMM, it is about looking at communication rather than through it to the presumed effects of it. However, what is equally important to this perspective is the way of looking at communication: it is not just looking any whichever way and it is particularly not looking at communication as merely an instrumental process of message sending. Rather it is looking at communication as a consequential process that brings about our social life: a process that we inhabit jointly and in which we co-create our humanity.

This understanding of communication as a process that we jointly inhabit and in which we co-create our humanity also impacts on the position we take to make sense of communication. When we take a communication perspective we cannot just look at communication from a removed position, from outside communication; rather we must come to terms with a way of being in communicating while ‘looking’ at it. In other words, we have to come to terms with being embodied in communication while simultaneously “looking” at the communication we are in. Barnett meditated on the implications of the way

CMM constitutes us and is constituted by us in his chapter on *Evolution and Transformation* (Pearce, 2012).

The ethos of CMM, then, is captured in what could be seen as three quite simple ideas: communication is material, we live in that materiality, and how we do is consequential to our social being. Yet, the upshot of putting these simple ideas into practice is quite profound. By turning the focus onto communication as a consequential process (rather than instrumental), and accepting we are part of this process, our whole way of understanding the world and our role as scholars has to be reimagined. Barnett called it a communication revolution (Pearce, 1989) and I, optimistically, referred to it as a postmodern turn (Penman, 2000). Either phrase will do, because both reflect the need to engage in a radical shift in looking and understanding; in taking on a “communication perspective”.

When I’m “in” this communication perspective and I’m being an activist scholar I find myself looking at the so-called problem, whether it be lack of procedural justice or patriarchal indigenous governance, in quite a different light. I look for the way the myriad of communication practices are bringing about the problem—not the official courtroom rules or the indigenous policy, but at the actual communication practices that make-up and reflect the broader structure. I look for the frameworks of meaning that account for the dynamics and lead in certain directions and not others. I look at where I am positioned to “see” these things and how my looking and participating matters: what am I helping to bring about in my being in the problem?

An orientation with a different set of practices

Perhaps another useful way of talking about the ethos of CMM, is to consider the distinction that Barnett (Pearce, 2009) drew between what he called an orientation (communication perspective) and a set of practices (CMM models and tools) with the goal being phronesis (acting to bring about change), not fact-generation or theory-making. It is the CMM ethos I am describing here that provides the orientation or essential context for acting to bring about change. In contrast, if we were talking about a conventional quantitative social researcher we would say that she has an empiricist orientation that guides a set of practices based on the scientific method, along with copious applications of statistics, that together bring about a particular research project designed to get “facts” or contribute to theory.

In either instance, the important point is that the orientation shores up the models and methods and without the mindful link between the models,

methods and orientation, the intent of the models can be lost or weakened and the goal side-stepped. Actions based only on tool application can readily fall short of what the orientation intended. When it comes to CMM, the use of the tools without the orientation turns CMM into nothing more than another theory within the scholarly mainstream. And this is definitely not the intent.

John Shotter (2014) offers a way of talking about the difference here by observing that while the concepts, terms, diagrams and the like of CMM may have the form of theoretical terms, they do not have the same function at all. Instead, their function is to help people change in their very "being-in-the-world", to offer ways of understanding so that they are able to go on. Note the function is not to answer the question, solve the problem or the like, but merely to go on—although, hopefully, well. Note also the idea of "being-in-the-world" points to a direct link between the CMM ethos and embodiment.

As a way of illustrating the difference here—between the mere use of models and models linked with an orientation—consider the various uses of dialogue extant in contemporary society. There is no doubt that there is a groundswell of opinion in favor of dialogue to ensure peace, sustain basic human rights, and to constructively respond to the complex multicultural, pluralistic world in which we live. And, for many activist scholars, I would imagine that proposals for dialogue are commonplace. Yet I believe the proposals can still fall short in meeting these promises. They fall short because the proposers have yet to challenge, and change, the implicit beliefs about communication on which many models of dialogue are built. Both communication and dialogue are viewed instrumentally rather than as consequential processes of central concern. As one of many examples, Makau and Marty (2013) develop an elaborate account of how dialogue and deliberation can correct the unraveling of community and dearth of civility that characterizes US culture today. Yet, at no such stage do they consider the way in which we think about/be in communication per se has any relevance. Indeed their glossary of terms does not even define communication: it is merely a taken-for-granted term on which other terms rest. For me, this failure to consider the very act of communication can only mean the understanding of dialogue that flows from it is somewhat impoverished.

Typically, the understanding of dialogue in the above context is no more than people getting together to talk. However, with the orientation offered by the CMM ethos, dialogue takes on a far more particular meaning and becomes an exemplar for all forms of practical inquiry as well as being a powerful

approach to change (Penman 2000). The work of the Public Dialogue Consortium (Spano, 2001) in Cupertino is one very important example of that.

Discarding old stories for new

- I sometimes think about the changes in ways of thinking and acting being called for by the CMM ethos as cultivating our ability, and those with whom we are communicating, to expand our horizons by creating new and better stories to move around in. This requires, amongst other things, the creation of new language games (in Wittgenstein's sense) or at least the joining of old and new ones.

Over the years, however, it has come to seem to me that it is not sufficient to just offer a new language or better stories. The deeply embedded nature of much of our way of thinking about communication is such that we are often truly blind to it. There is so much of our understanding about communication that is so terribly taken-for-granted that we don't even realise that understanding is not "real". To get beyond the taken-for-grantedness, we not only need new language but we may need to root out the old language that occludes our appreciation of the new.

Wittgenstein talks about this as "getting hold of the difficulty deep down". If you simply look at the problem on the surface of things it merely remains the problem it was. But to get at the difficulty deep down, it has to be pulled out by the roots. John Chetro-Szivos (2014) has written a compelling account of what is at stake deep down when it comes to teaching a communication perspective and especially the notion of joint action—an essential characteristic of the communication that a CMM ethos allows us to "see".

From my own experience, I think it is the belief in our self as an autonomous individual that is at the heart of what has to be rooted out. This belief is the crucial one that acts as the biggest stumbling block to apprehending a communication perspective with its orientation to joint action. I appreciate that it is easy to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals because each of us, physically at least, appears as a coherent entity. But, in other ways it is actually quite strange that this notion has persisted for so long, especially when you consider that this notion is not shared across cultures. It is also strange in the light of what we now know about child development and how we become 'human' through our interactions with caregivers. It is even stranger when considered in terms of how quantum mechanics accounts for material phenomena. For example, in the more recent developments of quantum theory, it is now argued that the observer and the observed are not

merely inseparable, they constitute each other, they bring each other about (Barad, 2007). Both the observer and the observed are made into what they are by virtue of their “jointness”.

While these three fields are quite disparate, contemporary developments in each of them contribute to an alternative understanding of the person and thus of communication. The contemporary developments are fully congruent with the ethos of CMM in which we see that persons are irrevocably connected, or entangled within communication. From that point of view, we have no need to construct the idea of an autonomous individual as the starting block. Instead, we start with the conception that the basic human reality is people in communicating. For example, Ken Gergen’s (2009) idea of the relational being captures this way of being-in-relation. He describes a world that is not within persons but within their relationships. Whatever people may think, remember, create and feel, they *participate* in relationships in order to do so.

The above observation also adds yet another element to our understanding of embodiment. If we take the idea of persons-in-conversations as the basic human reality, then our experience of embodiment also takes place through/in the relationships we participate in. Our embodied world is within our relationships with others. More could be added to this sense of embodiment through an exploration of Dewey’s (1981) arguments regarding experience—but that is for another day and another paper.

An ethical-moral way of being in communicating

In each of these different ways of talking about the CMM ethos there are direct, or indirect, allusions to a moral dimension. This moral dimension permeates all of CMM and it is this aspect that I find the most important to me as an activist scholar. Indeed, I chose the word “ethos”, rather than say “spirit” or “perspective”, to capture this core feature.

When you look at the CMM ethos as a way of looking and being, its hard to ignore the moral responsibilities and obligations of being an activist scholar when you accept that whatever you are doing is an intervention in communication. When you look at CMM as both an orientation and a set of models with the goal of change, it is again hard to ignore the moral responsibilities implicated by the change orientation. With both ways of looking, the scholar/researcher/practitioner activist (whatever you choose you call yourself) is in the process of communication with others and has obligations to those others.

This same sense of obligation and responsibility is brought to the fore when we root out the idea of the autonomous individual and accept a belief in the relational self. Just as in the recent developments of quantum physics, the people with whom we participate in communication are not merely inseparable from ourselves: we constitute each other; we bring each other about. When I remind myself of this (as I constantly do) I find the moral imperative to participate well with those others inescapable and profoundly felt.

Using one of the early and important ideas from CMM, we could describe this moral imperative as having strong prefigurative force: where our very story about the CMM ethos and our concomitant story about communication point to (compel?) our ways of acting and understanding. In particular, I think this strong prefigurative force makes it hard, if not impossible, to not be an activist in some form or other.

Using/embodying this ethos as activists

What is CMM-inspired activism?

To reiterate what I've said above, the CMM ethos is characterized by:

- A particular way of looking and being that takes communication to be a consequential process that we inhabit jointly and in doing so co-create our lives with others.
- Offering an orientation that acts as the critical context for a range of CMM models that, in so doing, changes their function from theory/description to tools for change.
- Requiring new language and new and better stories to move around in, especially stories that enhance a sense of a relational being.
- A foregrounded sense of moral obligation to the other.

Given this, it seems to me that we are inescapably change agents when acting within a CMM ethos. Indeed, from this ethos, whenever anyone engages in communication with others, change is inexorably brought about. So it seems to me that whether we describe ourselves as a researcher, an activist, a scholar, a practitioner, or any combination of such appellations, our practices are essentially the same—at least that is so from within the CMM ethos. This is not to deny, of course, the many different forms of activism that can be engaged in with a CMM ethos varying with context, change orientation, and tool usage, to name just a few.

Nevertheless, there are common practices that, in other contexts, have been identified as those of a transformative practical inquirer: an inquirer who is guided by the initial assumption that however the problem/issue is presented, they can address it by looking at and working within communication processes. These practices are also guided by the understanding that as soon as we initiate our activist activity, as it were, we are involved in the very problem we are addressing—not from a removed position but from a direct, first person position.

However, I think the most distinctive feature of this form of activism for me, is that is driven more from an obligation-based framework than a rights-based one. A rights-based approach starts from the perspective of the individual and their entitlements: a person has a right to speak, vote, not be discriminated against and so on, and it is this assertion that I find most commonly associated with activism. On the other hand, an obligation based approach arising from the CMM ethos starts from the perspective of the other and asks how we ought to communicate with them. In other words, the shift from rights to obligations moves our focus from advocating for the rights of the individual to do or expect something, or whatever the activism concern is, to the responsibilities that we all must meet if we are to become fully human in a social world. This shift to obligations also redresses an important neglect in understanding of citizenships and humanity—that of our duty and obligation as citizens, as well as whatever rights may be implicated.

Here I'm not suggesting that rights are unimportant, rather that our obligation to the other is primary from within a CMM ethos. Mind you, it is not just that ethos that supports such a claim and there are many other like-minded propositions from others who start their understanding of the world from that of persons-in-relation. Perhaps most notably though is Levinas (eg. see Pinchevski, 2005) who argues that because we are irreducibly relational beings our primary ethic resides in being responsive and responsible to the call of the other. From the Levinasian perspective, it is not the presence of I, the participant, that counts, but rather the extent to which the other commands responsibility from I.

When I embody this CMM ethos, and after so long I'm more or less doing so all the time, my sense of obligation to the other is powerfully felt. As a simple analogy, think about our everyday encounters with people in the street, where once you have caught the eye of the other you feel compelled to acknowledge the other (well, at least some of us do). In the same manner I feel the call of the other whenever I am conscious of that other. It is this call of the other that acts

as the underlying logical force for action (a prefigurative force on the part of the activist at least) and that orients the activist in different ways to bring about different things.

What are we making in CMM-inspired activism?

A further way of distinguishing CMM-inspired activism from other forms is to consider what is being made, or what are we bringing about when we are being CMM-inspired activists.

In the first instance, our obligation-driven framework orients us to set aside the rather common notion of an activist as a person fighting (and I deliberately use this metaphor) for rights in favor of an approach that sees the activist as working within difference, inequality or the like in such a way that new possibilities for all those involved are opened up. As part of this, we are as equally obligated to the oppressor and the oppressed alike, to use the language of everyday activism, and not just the oppressed. Both are part of a complex communication system and both constitute each other.

Second, CMM-inspired activists are oriented to bringing about new options or new possibilities for all involved, not merely the application of one powerfully held option (such as freedom or democracy) or indeed any solution as such. In other words, we are not trying to solve the presenting problem; instead we are trying to find new and better ways for all to go on. These ways to go on can be many and various.

Third, a CMM activist works with those involved to bring about new options by looking at the communion practices, regardless of how the problem may have been presented. In looking at these practices, the activist uses the tools and models of CMM not to predict or direct, but for way-making, for making offerings to everyone in the hope they can and do their way about.

Finally, I do not think it is easy to do this making as a CMM-inspired activist and nor do I think it should be. Given what we understand of the complexity of communication and the ways in which we live in and through it, always in relation with others, it makes good sense that being an activist can be challenging if not downright difficult. From my own experiences, mainly from working with large public and private organisations, or in certain fraught public contexts, there have been particular issues running like constant threads through my activism that bring out the tensions and difficulties inherent in being an activist working within the CMM ethos:

- I am very sensitive to falling into the autonomous individual trap. Even so, I still have to struggle to hold onto my belief in the jointness of our being, in the primacy of our relational self. Our cultural frameworks of meaning are so littered with a foundational belief in the autonomous self that it is sometimes feels like walking through a minefield of narcissism.
- It can be very hard (and often very frustrating) working across different meaning frame where I have a keen sense of communication as complex with my highest level of meaning one of mystery while those I am working with take communication to be simple with the highest level of meaning one of certainty.
- It can be very difficult acknowledging and working with the call of the other when you don't particularly like the other. In my own activist work this has often been the case when I have had to work with politicians and civil servants who hold political views quite contrary to my own—yet they need to change as much as the people I “really” want to help.
- I find I have to frequently remind myself that we constitute each other; we bring each other about. As such, I am not wholly responsible for trying to make things better and similarly I have not ‘failed’ if that doesn't happen.
- I also find I have to be constantly reminding myself that there is no one solution for any of the pressing social issues of the time when, of course, deep down part of me thinks I do know the answer. The (small?) part of me that thinks it knows the answer is still rooted in the belief in certainty; the other (larger?) part is striving for openness, incompleteness and mystery.

Despite these difficulties, or because of them, the experience of being a CMM-obligated activist is liberating. If done well, it is liberating for all involved and, most importantly, it is liberating because it is about the process of constructing new futures.

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