"WHAT WE NEED IS COMMUNICATION": "COMMUNICATION" AS A CULTURAL CATEGORY IN SOME AMERICAN SPEECH

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"Communication" is examined as a cultural term whose meaning is problematic in selected instances of American speech about interpersonal life. An ethnographic study, focusing on analysis of several cultural "texts," reveals that in the discourse examined here, "communication" refers, to close, supportive, flexible *speech, which functions as the "work" necessary to self-definition and interpersonal bonding. "Communication," thus defined, is shown to find its place in a "communication" ritual, the structure of which is delineated. The use of the definition formulated, and of the ideational context which surrounds it, is illustrated in an analysis of a recurring public drama, the "communication" theme shows on the Phil Donahue television program. Implications of the study are drawn for ethnography as a form of communication inquiry.*

THE materials which provided both the stimulus and the data for this study suggest that in some American speech about interpersonal life, "communication" carries localized and highly poignant meanings. The pervasiveness of "communication" in such speech, but more importantly the systematicity of its occurrence, its "compelling facticity,"[1] and the moral freight it carries for its users, make it an important term in an American symbolic universe and vocabulary of motives. This study is an ethnographic exploration of that term and of the discursive field in which it finds a place.

Our basic purpose is to make problematic the meaning of "communication" in some American texts. We are interested, for example, in what is meant by "communication" in the statement made by a mother, who said in discussing her daughter, "She don't communicate with me anymore" (earlier in the conversation she said she and her daughter do exchange routine information through speech);[2] in an advertisement placed in a business magazine which includes the message that "if the listener doesn't show genuine interest and sensitivity to what's being said . . . the communication will fail" (the advertisement attests to the importance of communication both at work and in home-work);[3] or in the description of a play by its director as being about "contemporary humanity's failure to communicate to reach love."[4] Consideration of these and other statements, in which "communication" is naturally embedded, has led us to ask, What differentiates that potent term "communication" from "mere talk" when Americans use it to discuss the quality of interpersonal life?

Our claim about the meaning of

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[1]The phrase is attributed to Clifford Geertz. See Hervé Varenne, *Americans Together: Structured Diversity in a Midwestern Town* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1977), p. 49.

[2]Anonymous caller, on the *Jennifer James Show*, KVI Radio, Seattle, Washington, March, 1981.

[3]An advertisement placed by Sperry in *Fortune*, 12 Jan. 1981, pp. 90–1.

[4]The statement is attributed to Bob Egan, Associate Artistic Director of the Seattle (Washington) Repertory Theatre, in reference to Tom Huey's *Wild Air*, in Jane Estes, "Playwright's *Wild Air* Study," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 1 Feb. 1981, p. H6.

"communication" in some American speech is limited in two ways. First, we have not exhaustively surveyed American uses of "communication" but have described one field of discourse—interpersonal relationships—in which it has a localized sense; it has other senses in other fields of American discourse. Second, we do not claim that all Americans ever inhabit the field of discourse in which "communication" finds a place.[5] We have, rather, uncovered and described the meanings and premises which give credence to *a* recognizable way of speaking that is part of the workings of the society in which we have conducted our inquiry. It is that way of speaking itself, as a code or system of meanings, and not its social ecology, which holds our attention here.

In showing that a domain of everyday experience and its linguistic representation are cultural creations, we record and interpret a datum, an instance of humans creating and constituting a world of meaning in their own terms. That "communication" labels the academic discipline we practice is more or less incidental to the general point being made—that domains of everyday experience, such as communication, and the terms in which people make them intelligible to each other, such as "communication," are subject to human invention and coloration. Thus, in providing a glimpse into an American definition of "communication" we hope to show the possibility for scientific and critical insight which the cultural perspective affords the student of speech behavior.[6]

Method

Data for the inquiry were gathered, by both of us, during the course of one year of collaborative field work, directed toward discovering a culturally patterned way of speaking in contemporary America. Our field work took many forms, including the construction of in-depth life studies of several people, the analysis of everyday events and scenes, the collection and interpretation of assorted texts, and the reading of commentaries on American life.

The core material for the project consists of case studies of communication in the lives of two women, each of whom was born and raised in the American Pacific Northwest. Each case study is treated as a text constructed on the basis of (1) transcripts from several unstructured interviews, (2) a log kept by each woman for three days, describing, along a given format, the communication events in which she took part during those days,[7] and (3) focused, *in-situ* observations of each woman's communication conduct. Many other texts were also examined, a few of which are interspersed throughout this report.

The principal case studies were given detailed interpretations with an eye to the role played by "communication" and related categories such as "self" and "relationship" in each informant's pre-

[5]By way of contrast, note that the study by Hart, *et al*, concludes with a section on "Toward a Sociology of Interpersonal Communication," whereas we delineate only a cultural perspective or ideology, not its sociological distribution. See Roderick P. Hart, Robert E. Carlson, and William F. Eadie, "Attitudes Toward Communication and the Assessment of Rhetorical Sensitivity," *Communication Monographs*, 47 (1980), 1-22. But also see Hawkins, *et al*, whose data suggest that at least part of the ideology we describe below plays well in one part of America's heartland, Marion County, Indiana. James L. Hawkins, Carol Weisberg, and Dixie W. Ray, "Spouse Differences in Communication Style: Preference, Perception, and Behavior," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 42 (1980), 585-93.

[6]For our use of the cultural approach, we are indebted to David M. Schneider, "Notes Toward a Theory of Culture," in *Meaning in Anthropology*, ed. Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), p. 208.

[7]The diary: diary-interview method is discussed in Don Zimmerman and D. Lawrence Wieder, "The Diary: Diary-Interview Method," *Urban Life*, 5 (1977), 479-98.

sentation of herself and her life. In their presentation below, we deliberately mixed our readings of the lives studied with readings of other texts which constitute part of the life-world which we and our informants inhabited, and with our readings of academic treatises.[8] We consciously used our experiencing of these texts, considered singly and in juxtaposition to each other, to develop a grounded theory of "communication" as a cultural category in the speech examined.

Once the primary analysis was, for the most part, completed, we examined another set of cultural texts, transcripts of The Phil Donahue Show, which is a popular program shown daily on American television and the inspiration of a recent best-selling book.[9] Each show selected dealt with the subject of interpersonal relationships, and each thematized "communication" as the remedy to all problems. These transcripts were examined for their general structure and content to test, and to articulate further, the theory initially grounded in life studies and anecdotal evidence.

A Reading of Two Lives as American Texts

Informant One

M is a 36-year old woman, divorced, the mother of two daughters, ages six and eight. She has a degree in social work but has not worked in that field and is presently not employed outside her home.

A key distinction in M's metalinguistic lexicon is that between "small talk," the speech of acquaintances, and "real communication," which is to her the speech of close friends in an intimate context (either face-to-face or by telephone). She sees persons as occupying a "personal space" (a term she used many times) that may or may not be penetrated by another person. "Communication" is, in part, an act of interpenetration. The expression "close friend" reinforces M's essentially spatial metaphor for "communication" (the equivalent expression in Hebrew is "good friend"). "Close friends," people with whom M can talk about her problems, and who will listen sympathetically even if they disagree with her, are contrasted with other friends with whom she associates mainly by "doing things together." When M says about a friend that he or she is "close" enough to hurt her, she implies that intimacy involves the highest of rewards as well as of risks, and the tension between the two is a source of interpersonal problems that persist after initial differences are overcome.

Much of M's biographical speech with us reports her frustration in meeting her need for "real communication." She feels her parents punished her for expressing herself, and she said as a result she was an (emotionally) "abused" child. M described her relationship with her ex-husband in similar terms. Her husband constantly "put her down" verbally as "a lousy person" and criticized her because to him, as she said, "an o.k. person does not have problems." His refusal to discuss her problems, which he said were intrapersonal difficulties, was for M the major source of distress in the marriage. She saw her ex-husband's attitude as one step more extreme and destructive than that of her parents in terms of her sense of self-worth; with the parents it was the verbalization of a problem, with the husband the very experience of one, which was unacceptable.

[8]Among the works consulted are Peter Berger, Hansfried Kellner, and Brigitte Berger, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York:Vintage Books, 1973); Francis L. K. Hsu, *Clan, Caste, and Club* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1963); Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); Varenne.

[9]Phil Donahue and Company, *Donahue: My Own Story* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1979).

Thus, "communication" was the substance of the major conflicts in M's life. In not being allowed to express herself in the way she felt she both needed and deserved to do, she felt she was disconfirmed as a person. The relationships M had with her parents and ex-husband lacked "supportiveness," the term she most often used to describe the nature of positively experienced forms of interaction.

Like many modern parents, M reports that much of her communication with her children stands in defiance of her own childhood experience. She tries to help her children "feel good about themselves"—she listens to them, answers all their questions, and provides detailed explanations and information about the world around them. A crucial function of parent-child communication, for M, is to help the child develop a "positive self-image." It is important to her not to have any "hassles" with her children in the morning before school, so that they do not spend the day feeling "what a no good person I am," which in turn makes them vulnerable to the inevitable "hassles" they encounter in dealing with others. To M the world is basically hostile, and one needs a "thick skin" to shield one from its troubles. She believes a "positive self-image" is such a shield, so that feeling good about oneself is a key to survival. A "positive self-image" can be achieved, according to M, only through "supportive communication."

The sense of problematicity that pervades M's experience of herself and of her world is in her view part of human experience in general. She inevitably attributes interpersonal problems to discrepant life experiences which resulted in irreconcilable personal differences. For example, she said her marriage could not have succeeded because she and her husband had different backgrounds; even if they had had similar needs, she said, they needed to meet them in different ways.

In the view we are explicating, human uniqueness makes "communication" both vitally important and highly problematic. If people are unique, the kind of mutual disclosure and acknowledgment entailed in "communication" provide a necessary "bridge" from self to others. But if people are unique, they also lack the mutuality necessary for achieving interpersonal meaning and coordination.

The resolution to the dilemma posed by human uniqueness is found in M's belief that the individual has the capacity to change through "communication." One source for new definitions of self is the communication by others about oneself. The moral imperative which attends this possibility is to be "open" to the "feedback" which others can supply. For M, it is both natural and desirable that persons be continually exposed to and "open" to such a "rhetoric of conversion" in the interpersonal realm. Another source of materials for "personal growth" is the exercise of what is believed to be the innate capacity to choose what to be and become. We call the sense of moral obligation which attends this capacity "the imperative for self definition." According to M, if a person is unhappy with his or her self at a given time, then the person can and should change so as to maximize a sense of well-being. For example, she expressed strong disapproval of a man who would not quit a well-paying but personally unsatisfying job; she criticized him both because he would not change jobs and because he was not "open" to others' suggestions that he explore the possibility of change.

Thus, in the life and speech of M, "communication" derives its potency from the combined effect of the beliefs in personal uniqueness and personal mal-

leability and from the normative injunctions to be "open" and to define one's self continually. These beliefs and norms are predicated on a view of the self as constantly changing and the concomitant experience of one's identity as shifting not only through time but also across roles and situations. With respect to the assumption of uniqueness, "communication" functions as the "how" of self, as the way to create and sustain a sense of personal identity by having it validated by another person. And, to the degree there is a tension between the demands imposed by the imperative to yield control for self-definition to others and the imperative continually to re-make one's self, "communication" is viewed as the dialectic of these opposing forces from which emerges a "negotiated self."

One of the fundamental tensions of that dialectic is the clash between the belief that persons constantly change with the belief that each person has a "core," a unique endowment. M reconciles those beliefs by claiming that life experiences affect persons crucially but mainly affect the external layers of "self." The core is affected only by a traumatic experience, or through the intervention of counseling, which M believes is the only way to solve difficult personal problems. She vacillates between an emphasis on either the fixed or fluctuating aspects of self in constructing an acceptable account of her life and world.

The belief that there is a personal core gives rise to a "rhetoric of naturalness." It was stated in so many words by the instructor in a workshop we observed on "Effective Oral Presentations." The instructor said to students preparing to give a speech: "Be yourself, be natural." And, in describing the experience of giving a stilted speech, the instructor warned: "You actually become somebody else, you're not relaxed." Thus, the "work" of being oneself consists of shedding unnecessary impediments to the experience and of presenting one's "true self." It can also be the "work" involved in constructing a unified entity experienced (and presented) as one's self. For M, this must be done against the background of a diverse and changing world. Thus, she feels the need constantly to check her interpretations of events against the "feedback" derived from others through "communication." In this way she enhances her sense of reality: "Then I could deal with what was really happening and not what I imagined."

In conclusion, the study of "communication" in M's life became a study of the many ways she has tried, failed, and succeeded in building up a sense of "self," of the symbolic and interpretive code underlying this struggle, and of the way it has been played out in several crucial interpersonal relationships.

Informant Two[10]

K is a 25-year old woman. She is single, holds a degree in business administration, and works in a health food store during the day and in a tavern two nights a week.

K frequently used the term "communication" in talking about herself, others, and life in general. As with M, all of K's references to "communication" relate to its interpersonal function. This was of particular interest in that a great deal of K's talk referred to work settings, yet she made no reference to the instrumental function of communication.

K's self image is explicitly linked to her view of her own abilities as a

[10]We are indebted to Cheryl R. Marty-White, who collected the materials used in our study of informant two, and who allowed us to use her field materials. We are responsible for the analysis and interpretations given.

communicator, and she prides herself on her versatility as a communicator saying she can communicate equally well with "a bum on First Avenue and the president of a corporation." When she expressed self-doubts concerning her worth as a person, these took the form of misgivings concerning her abilities as a communicator: "It's very important to me to communicate well with people . . . sometimes you are taken aback . . . you realize you are not so good at that . . . then you kind of humble yourself and realize maybe you are not this open person you thought you were. . . ." Being a good communicator and being an "open" person are near-equivalents in K's parlance.

"Open communication" is the phrase K reserves for her preferred form of communication, which is on a par with "really talking" for M. The former phrase encompasses both the notion of full mobilization of inner resources, so as to be able "to totally experience what is happening to me," as well as the notion of full utilization of the interactional opportunities posed by a unique other person. Thus: "I'm usually very open to conversation with our customers. I take advantage of the unique, unusual people that may pass through the door by verbally communicating with them."

K conceives both the self and the other as resources, as potentialities to be exploited. "Communication" is the process by which this exploitation of resources is carried out. The industrial metaphor which underlies this way of speaking, whereby the person is seen as both the resource and the product of social life, is quite apparent. "Communication" thus becomes the production process, which in itself is both a resource and a product.

For K, the self constantly changes in and through "communication." She invariably conceptualizes such change positively—as development, improvement, or "growth." Lack of "communication" implies more than lack of growth, but rather a sense of running in place, of stagnation: "Communication allows me to grow . . . it scares me to be stagnant." Through "communication" the experience of self and other are merged and intensified: "The only way to get ultimate experiences is to experience other people through communication." Whereas M is concerned mainly with the supportive role of communication in validating self images, K is at least as much concerned with the prior stage of constructing a self through "communication," so that the self as "communicator" becomes the paramount role with which she identifies. It is the most neutral and universal of roles, as in one form or another it applies to all social situations. In thinking of herself in these terms, K seems to mitigate the experience of multiple realities, and the ominousness of an open-ended identity.

Our second informant uses "prison-house" imagery to describe the non-interacting self. She described how, as an adolescent, she felt inhibited in her social interaction although deep inside she knew she was "open" to "communication." She said she felt she had to "lock the extrovert inside this cage." Similarly functioning expressions are "outlet" and "escape into another," the latter describing "communication" as that process whereby one is emancipated from the prison-house of the non-interacting self. Of her family, K said: "Our family is not really an open family. You didn't just sit down and work out and talk about problems." She links this to a widespread shortcoming of people of her parents' generation, which consisted of "not communicating, not getting in touch with their children's feeling." K was able to "communicate" with her mother, who was her confidant. However, her father's unwillingness to engage

in communication of the type she felt she needed, and thereby to legitimize it as the preferred way to conduct family affairs, had a detrimental effect on the way she experienced her communication with her family. Thus, she described her communication with her mother in terms of refuge rather than of liberation: "In communicating with my mother, she was great and she took refuge in me because she could communicate with me and she couldn't with my dad, and he was so closed and she needed the outlet."

Although K said she knew her parents loved her, she also said she was very unhappy during her adolescence. The source of her distress was the absence of a forum accepted by all family members in which to discuss feelings, air differences, and examine divergent orientations. The communicative climate, which was marked by a lack of "open" interpersonal communication among all members of the family, rendered their family, as an integrative unit, less than satisfactory to K. K predicted that she would repeat some of the mistakes her parents had made in raising her, but, she insisted, "there are things I have learned, and that is that communication is important."

"Communication" is so important to K that the highest level of communication she recognizes is talk about talk. In the log she kept, K described the most rewarding communicative experience she had ever had, which occurred in the initial phase of what was to become an intimate relationship: "We sat for two hours at breakfast discussing each person's ability and method of communicating. We spoke on levels far beyond normal chit-chat." The level of "normal chit-chat" seems to be the equivalent of the term "small talk" in the speech of M. Talking about one's communicative profile is, presumably, part of what M defined as "real talk." The purpose of this intense preoccupation with ways of communicating was to pre-illumine each person's mode of operation in the communicative sphere so as to be able to anticipate and thereby prevent possible "breakdowns" in "communication." As "communication" is the "how" of love, or the vehicle of intimacy, its inner workings should be studied and controlled.

In conclusion, the second informant conceives of persons much in the same way as the first: they inhabit a "personal space" which can be penetrated through the act of "communication"; each person is unique and this is a resource to be exploited for one's growth and development; lack-of-growth-through-"communication" equals stagnation, even the loss of identity. The self is experienced as an event or is not experienced at all; one's identity is closely tied to one's view of oneself as communicator, which seems to be the generalized role of the person in this orientational system. Thus, concern with self-definition and self-validation is expressed as concern over one's own quality as a communicator. Like M, K is extremely concerned with having control over life, which she interprets as control over her communicative encounters. She is cheerful and pleasant with everybody, assuming that thereby she will secure a similar response to herself, and she engages in metacommunicative discussion as a form of "preventive treatment" in the interpersonal domain.

The Semantic Dimensions of "Communication"

In the speech of our informants, and in the other texts we have examined in the course of our inquiry, there is evidence of two distinctive clusters of terms referring to communication. One cluster includes such terms as "real communication," "really talking," "sup-

portive communication," and "open communication." "Communication," without a modifier, can also be included in this cluster when the term appears in the context of discussing "self" and "relationships." The other cluster includes such terms as "small talk," "normal chit-chat," and "mere talk." It is probably the case that neither cluster is exhaustively delineated here, but the present assignment of terms is defensible in the light of our field materials.

"Communication" and "mere talk" are differentiated on several semantic dimensions. The dimensions discussed below were derived from our readings of the lives of M and K and of related texts in which "communication" was a key term. We tried to make sense of these various instances of the use of "communication" by submitting them to a kind of distinctive features analysis. The dimensions were thus derived inductively, based on scrutiny of the texts we collected and constructed.[11] M and K, and the producers of the other texts we examined, use the dimensions *close/distant, supportive/neutral,* and *flexible/rigid* to differentiate "communication" from "mere talk." In what follows, these dimensions will be defined, analyzed into finer discriminations, and applied to "communication" and "mere talk."

The first dimension identified, *close/distant,* suggests an essentially spatial metaphor. "Communication" is the medium for intercourse between those who are "close," such as "close friends" and intimates. Although the spatial metaphors of proximity and similarity are relevant here, perhaps of most relevance is the spatial metaphor of penetration. Specifically, "communication" is high on interpenetration of the interlocutors' unique psychological worlds. To the degree that each interlocutor makes public what was previously private information about his or her unique self image, *closeness,* one feature of "communication," is manifested. This is intimate speech, speech which penetrates psychological boundaries and barriers. "Mere talk," by contrast, is talk in and through which one "keeps his distance" or "stays at arm's length" from another. The content of this latter kind of speech is "everyday chit-chat," a content which is independent of the unique self images of the speakers.

Supportive/neutral refers to the degree in which each interlocutor is committed to providing positive evaluations of the other's self. To engage in "communication," it is not necessary that one approve everything the other has *done*—the other's *actions*—but that one approve the other *qua* unique and precious individual. This is speech in which unconditional positive regard finds its natural home. The dimension does not contrast positive with negative evaluation, but the degree to which positive evaluation is relevant and salient. Thus, the polar opposite, manifested in "mere talk," is not negative evaluation, but rather is the absence of a commitment to, and the absence of the relevance of, positive evaluation.

A third dimension refers to the degree of *flexibility* manifested by the participants in the speech event. By flexibility is meant a willingness to listen to and acknowledge the other's presentation of self, to listen to and actively try to understand the other's evaluation of oneself, and to be willing to consider changing one's perception of self or other contingent upon the meanings which emerge in the speech event. This is the speech of emergent realities, of negotiated selves and the negotiated relationship. "Mere talk," by contrast is considered that talk which is governed by a set of conventions

[11]We follow closely here the suggestions and wording of Peter Seitel, "Haya Metaphors for Speech," *Language in Society,* 3 (1974), 51–67.

independent of those which have been forged between the two interlocutors.

The three dimensional contrasts made above are formalized here to make explicit our emergent hypothesis about the mapping of the semantic dimensions represented by the native terms "communication" and its opposite "mere talk." The analysis suggests that, for our informants, "communication" refers to *close*, *supportive*, and *flexible* speech between two or more people, and that it can be contrasted with "mere talk," which is relatively more *distant*, *neutral*, and *rigid*.

"Communication" as Interpersonal "Work"

Thus far we have defined "communication" by contrasting it with "mere talk." We further define it here by discussing its relationship to two other terms, which have emerged as salient for the interpersonal domain. An examination of "self," "relationship," and "communication," as they occur in our informants' speech, indicates that these terms label categories which together constitute a domain of meaning. In what follows we explore the key figure of speech which makes that domain of meaning intelligible, and we articulate the key interrelationships among these terms. The purpose of these explorations is to deepen understanding of "communication" as a cultural category by examining it as one term in a larger "code of talking."

Our field notes yield the following observations about the words used in some American speech: People "work" on their "relationship" or make their "relationship work"; they "work" on "themselves" and on their "communication" together; "nervous breakdowns" within the person's mental machinery have been supplanted by "breakdowns" in "relationships" and "breakdowns" in "communication." Thus in the world of meaning constituted by the speech we have examined, "self," "relationship," and "communication" are things one can have and discuss, as well as take apart, examine, put together again, and make to "work."

The figure which lends coherence to these three terms is the "work" metaphor. This is manifested in the use of "self," "relationship," and "communication" as objects of the "work" people do, as things which can be "worked on." It is also manifested in the notion of "communication" as the "work" necessary to construct a "self" and develop a "relationship." Although most of the metaphorical expressions used invoke the notion of a machine, there is an extension of the metaphorical domain to include other, not necessarily machine-based, industries. For example, people are said to "invest" in each other, but mainly in their "relationships"; people "contribute" to a "relationship," give one thing to it and take another. This secondary metaphoric domain is based on more organismic images, so there is talk of the "relationship growing," of "communication" being "alive," and of the "self" being involved in a continuous process of "growth."

Metaphors, as James Fernandez has written, "take their subjects and move them along a dimension or set of dimensions."[12] In the way of speaking examined here, interpersonal life is made intelligible by moving it along the *work* dimension and thus increasingly derives its validation from its ethos of performance. This is epitomized by the notion of "competence" that is so naturally applied to the interpersonal domain. Interpersonal life, which in some ways of speaking is associated with home and

[12] James Fernandez, "Persuasions and Performances: Of the Beast in Every Body . . . and the Metaphors of Every Man," *Daedalus*, 101 (1972), p. 47.

subjectivity,[13] has in the speech of our informants been made an arena for work and technique. To the first informant, a person can be judged by the quality of their "relationships"; the second judges herself and others by the quality of their "communication." The "self," when it is discussed, is described in terms of its components; references are made to feelings, responses, and experiences, all of which can be "worked on," and not to the person as a whole. Both informants imply that interpersonal life is fundamentally an arena for work in which one's competence is the primary determinant of performance success.

People can be judged by many standards—their birth, blood, heroic deeds, or as intrinsically precious by virtue of being alive. The way of speaking we have examined is notable for the emphasis it places on the competence to perform interpersonal "work." In this speech, "communication" competence would be a person's capacity for *close, supportive, flexible* speech in the discussion of—and thus, in the "work" upon—one's self and one's relationships. Note that competence here is not an attainment, it is a capacity, and given the changing nature of persons and the moral imperative not to "stagnate," it is a capacity which is and should be continually put to new tests. Thus, interpersonal life, in the terms of this communication code, is a life of unrelenting work in which one's competence is ever newly applied and newly tested.

If the conceptualization of the interpersonal domain as an arena for "work" creates great demands for effective performance, it also provides a way to mitigate a sense of personal responsibility for one's interpersonal difficulties or failures. Our informants attributed family problems and divorces to the absence of "communication" and to the reluctance of people to "work" on their "relationship" or their "communication." If "the relationship" can be made responsible for some aspects of human conduct, then the burden of the "self" is eased. Thus, when "communication breaks down," and "the relationship" does not "work," both parties can still be "O.K." Such a way of speaking helps to mitigate the discomfort which attends difficulties or misconduct and thus enhances the state of "feeling good about oneself," which is the ultimate goal of interpersonal life as here conceived.

Given the importance of effective interpersonal work in the way of speaking formulated here, we could expect that highly routinized procedures have been developed for doing that work. Such procedures have been codified in our discussion of the "communication" ritual to which we turn next. Here we turn from a metaphor supplied by our informants, that of "communication" as "work," to one supplied by us, that of "communication" as "ritual."

The "Communication" Ritual

Throughout this paper we have noted that the people we have studied do not consider all talk to be "communication." Nor is all interpersonally oriented talk experienced to be as satisfying and liberating as "communication" implies for the informants. A more specific set of expectations has evolved concerning the episodic sequence referred to by the native phrases "sit down and talk," "work out problems," or "discuss our relationship." We call such a sequence the "communication" ritual. It functions as ritual as it is the culturally preferred way to reaffirm the status of what the culture defines as a sacred object—the

[13]David S. Kemnitzer, "Sexuality as a Social Form: Performance and Anxiety in America," in *Symbolic Anthropology: A Reader in the Study of Symbols and Meanings*, ed. Janet L. Dolgin, David S. Kemnitzer, and David M. Schneider (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 297-8.

definition of "self" as experienced by any one of the participants, usually the one who initiates the sequence.

In what follows we outline the basic ingredients of the "communication" ritual in terms of several components of speech events as discussed by Hymes.[14] The purpose of this outline is to point to a general mold, not to provide a recipe for communicative encounters. Obviously, each enactment of the ritual, each token of the general type, will deviate from it one way or another, but this general account captures the essential ingredients of the ritual as we understand it. The following of Hymes' categories were used for the description: topic, purpose, participants, act sequence, setting, and norm of interaction.

Topic. The topic is problems arising in one's experience of one's "self" and one's world. Both "self" and world must be defined by each individual but these definitions must also be validated by others. The simultaneous awareness of personal uniqueness and the demand for intimacy and mutual validation is a continual source of problems, which are experienced as inter- rather than intrapersonal. Thus, their solution naturally calls for "communication," and this is not accompanied by a sense of imposition because the others will consider the problems their own, too. Turning inward and brooding over a problem is not considered a step toward its solution. Hamlet, if he were a member of this culture, would have tried to sit down and talk things over with his family or at least discuss his problem with Ophelia. "Communication" seems closely related to this sense of problematicity, and it seems that the term "fun" as in "having lots of fun together" is reserved to the description of light-heartedness and well-being in the interpersonal domain (in which "communication" is not "fun" but "work").

Purpose. The purpose of the ritual is to resolve the sense of problematicity that one or more of the participants experiences, by affirming participants' identities and engendering intimacy. In a "talk show," which dealt with death, recently shown on American television, one of the participants said the purpose of the sequence she advocates is for "people to relate to each other in a positive way around a difficult issue." This captures much of the purpose of the "communication" ritual and indicates that it is not a problem solving session in the regular sense that participants have a specific problem that can be overcome and resolved. Rather, participants are expected to face whatever problem emerges in a dignified way, i.e., through talk of the supportive variety. The person who refuses to face problems by discussing them is felt to be "copping out," to be relinquishing control over life, and thereby that person becomes unwholesome.

Participants. Participants are (potentially) all the persons considered by the initiator of the ritual to be intimates who will not be imposed upon by discussion of the "problem" as they consider it, in part, their own. For a primary unit such as a family to be considered well-functioning, all its members have to be committed to the communication ritual on a symmetrical basis, so that the enactment of the ritual is surrounded by a climate of legitimacy.

Act sequence. There are constraints on the way the episodic sequence labelled the communication ritual can proceed.[15] The structural constraints

[14]Dell Hymes, "Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life," in *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, ed. John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston), pp. 35–71.

[15]This formulation is patterned after Goffman's description of the "remedial interchange." Erving

that seem to govern its unfolding are: (1) Initiation: a member of an intimate pair initiates the sequence by announcing the existence of a personal problem which can be "worked out" only through "communication" with other members of the primary group. The initiator suggests that they "sit down and talk about it." (2) Acknowledgment: The addressee(s) acknowledge the problem, its legitimacy as an interpersonal concern, and its relevance to the other members of the primary group by indicating their willingness to enact the sequence. They disengage themselves from other activity and make ready to render the discussion of the problem the focus of their attention. They "sit down to talk." (3) Negotiation: The problem is formulated, its ingredients examined from as many perspectives as possible, and its implications for the initiator and the other participants in the ritual are studied. The initiator does a great deal of the self-disclosing, and the other participant's behavior is marked by empathic listening, non-judgmental comments, and non-inquisitiveness. The initiator's attitude is that of openness both to feedback and to change. (4) Reaffirmation: The need for this phase seems to derive from the potential effect on the negotiation phase, in which discrepant positions, needs, and interpretations between committed individuals are brought into relief. At times a compromise on the substantive level is not possible, and at all times the discord is threatening on the relationship level. It is this threat that the reaffirmation phase seeks to mitigate.

Setting. The setting in which the ritual is appropriately enacted is one in which talk is accepted as the focal activity, in which interlocutors have privacy and can be fully immersed in each other.

Norm of interaction. When a person experiences a problem related to his or her sense of identity and/or to his or her functioning in the social world, the person should initiate the "communication" ritual. Conversely, a person who is approached by an intimate concerning a problem the latter experiences should reciprocate by helping him or her to enact the communication ritual. The norm calling for enactment of the sequence is very powerfully felt, to the extent that it loses its formative status of the "how" of love and the "how" of self and becomes the only indicator of their very existence. In this orientational system, not having a problem is interpreted as suppression or reluctance to face the problems one "must have" by virtue of being "alive" in the world today. A state of nothing in particular happening in one's life—no change—is experienced as dullness and deadening boredom, and long-term relationships are particularly vulnerable to it. As one of our informants put it, the comforts of a long-term marriage and its habitual structure prevent one from searching for a higher awareness of "self" and "relationship." This kind of probing is made possible and legitimate in enacting the ritual, so that for some people the absence of the ritual becomes the problem. This can be a tangled issue when partners disagree about their commitments to enact the ritual with each other. Unlike any other disagreement, this one cannot be remedied through "communication"—an attempt to do so would be a *de facto* enactment of the "communication" ritual. The gripping force the norm can have was indicated on two occasions when people with whom we discussed this project at length, a few

Goffman, "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1967), esp. pp. 19–23. Our remarks here are also informed by Thomas S. Frentz and Thomas B. Farrell, "Language-Action: A Paradigm for Communication," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 62 (1976), 333–49.

days later in the context of discussing their lives, expressed the strong belief that "communication" is important, and that one should "sit down and talk." The ethnographic smile that lighted our faces did not jolt them into "hearing" what they were saying. When it was pointed out explicitly, they noticed and concurred.

Finally, we speculate that the intensity of the preoccupation with the kind of speech found in the "communication" ritual stands in sharp contrast to the communicative requirements of non-intimate encounters in this society, where the ruling injunction seems to be: "Thou shalt exude well-being." Our first informant commented on this bitterly, saying, "If I am mad I don't care who knows that I am mad," and she described herself as a social misfit in this regard. The second informant seemed rather compulsive in following this injunction, pointing out that she took care not to burden others with her problems and, by so doing, secured a similar behavior towards herself. This, it seems to us, puts an added burden on interpersonal relationships in primary groups or dyads. They become the only source of personal validation, given the strong proscription against self-exposure in non-intimate settings. The "communication" ritual, then, is so terribly important not only because it allows the expression of the "how" of love and the "how" of self, but also because it is the only place to find them.

Having defined "communication," situated it in a larger code of meaning about interpersonal work, and formulated the episodic sequence by which such a work is most naturally performed, we can make sense of "communication" (as it appears in some American speech) in a way we could not have done before. Thus, we conclude by turning to a brief examination of a communication event which has a prominent place in American life. We turn now to an examination of a television show which is witnessed daily by a large number of Americans and in which "communication," as we have formulated it, is very naturally and poignantly spoken by the participants.

On Being "in Touch" With Phil Donahue

The Phil Donahue show practices and preaches the "communication" creed we have described. At the studio in Chicago, Phil Donahue and his guests "sit down and talk." They discuss interpersonal problems that many Americans would not talk about in the privacy of their homes, and the voice travels across America: "What you need is communication." Indeed, to be fully "in touch" with Phil Donahue, one must also be in touch with the "communication" ritual and the meanings to which it gives expression.[16]

Phil Donahue, it will be noted, does not deal with insoluble problems in his broadcasts, he deals with problems that *seem* insoluble to the people "out there" who are enmeshed in them. To his guests, these are problems they have solved. Underlying these shows is a rhetoric of conversion. It is not the person who beats his wife and cannot stop—it is the ex-wife batterer—who is invited to the show; it is not the person who is struggling with his sexual identity but the person who has come to terms with it that we see. It is they who have a message to convey, and the message is: "I could change, you can, too."

The Phil Donahue show marks off a world of talk where the "real stuff" is brought to light; emotions are thematized and simplified by being abstracted from conduct and experience ("today's

[16]Our analysis of the Phil Donahue Show is based on shows broadcast during June and July of 1980.

show deals with jealousy"). The climate is generally supportive (when it is not, Donahue chastises the audience); interlocutors openly "share" their feelings and views; the phenomena dealt with are provocative and problematic, such as children who "divorce" their parents, husbands who beat their wives, couples who agree to have extra-marital affairs, and so on. The specific topic is not of concern here, the point is that anything can be a problem if so perceived, and any problem can (and should) be overcome by enacting a version of the "communication" ritual. A statement to this effect by one of the participants in the show which dealt with parents' and children's rights was as follows:

> Okay. Well, I think what Lee is talking about here is that she felt that she wasn't getting an adequate forum at home to discuss her problem. . . . This first woman that spoke was saying: "Well, we could have talked it out, and if the child didn't want to go that's fine." But many of these cases come up when there is just no communication at home. Now Cindy here went to court to have herself declared incorrigible and taken away from her parents. And she said there were long stretches of time when her parents just didn't talk to her at all, let alone have a basis for communication.

The excerpt, which is representative of many others taken from Donahue shows, illustrates the high value assigned to "communication" by Donahue participants, and implies awareness, and belief in the efficacy of the "communication" ritual. The healing value of communicating about problems is attested by the mother of a woman who, through her childhood, had been sexually abused by her father. Like many other people on the show, she feels her message to the public has a missionary value to it, and it involves a call for "communication": "I'm here to support our daughter and to offer help to people who have had the same thing happen to them who will understand. But mostly, that things can be worked out, and as a family you can learn to communicate, you can learn to overcome what has happened." On another show, dealing with marital infidelity, a couple who had overcome the "problem" described their newly found intimacy. The wife said: "The communication we have now is so different. I trust his honesty, he'll answer any question, won't become vague . . . doesn't say, 'put it behind you, forget it.' "

In line with the view that problems are always to be solved in an interacting context, the guest whose problems are thematized often appear with some of their intimates, i.e., potential participants in the "communication" ritual. The clearest example we found was the above-mentioned show on incest in families, where the sexually abused daughter appeared on the show with both parents (who were in silhouettes). This appearance, like all others, was a post-conversion one, so that given the episodic structure of the ritual, the normative expectation is that by following the "communication" ritual in which they all had taken part (and to which they testified), their relationship could be fully reaffirmed. It was interesting, therefore, to note that the daughter, who appeared to us to be angry with her father, worked so hard to contain her anger; anger was out of place in the "script" implicit in the Donahue show, which presupposes a sequence which ends with a reaffirmation phase.

The special rhetorical effectiveness of the Donahue "communication" shows is due to the iconicity of its form and its content: Donahue does what he says, and he says what he does. He both embodies and calls for the possibility of personal conversion. He capitalizes on his standing as the arch-convert who has learned that women are persons, too,

and that if you have a problem you must not keep it to yourself, but "sit down and talk about it."

In response to an obstinate caller who refused to see the light, Phil Donahue expressed the injunction that underlies his show and seems to underlie interpersonal ceremony in private life as well: "We are not asking you to change this culture, but we can ask you as an adult to step back and look at what you are saying." This seems very much like the ethnographer's task—to step back and look at what people are saying, Phil Donahue among them.

Conclusion

By interpreting several instances of American speech, we have constructed a way to hear the term "communication" which renders its use in that speech intelligible and illuminating. We have found that in the field of discourse in which "communication," "self," and "relationship" co-occur, "communication" refers to that speech which manifests mutual self disclosure, positive regard for the unique selves of the participants, and openness to emergent, negotiated definitions of self and other. Such *close*, *supportive*, and *flexible* speech is the artful "work" required to follow the contradictory cultural injunctions, "be yourself" and "be the self you want to be" while simultaneously conceding to others part of the control for self definition.

Thus, "communication" is a culturally distinctive solution to the universal problem of fusing the personal with the communal. In the ideology in which "communication" is a pivotal term, affirming oneself in and through a process of social interaction is the highest good. But this is always problematic. Each person is unique among persons, that is, different from all others due to differential life experiences, and each person is malleable, that is, subject to change due to personal will and changing definitions supplied by others. Given human uniqueness, the interpenetration of life worlds is always necessary for understanding another person, and thus validation of another's self image is always problematic. Given human malleability, such interpenetration holds the promise of the kind of interpersonal speech which fosters the favorable conditions of growth and change, and failure to expose oneself to such experiences is tantamount to denying one's full humanity. Thus, the achievement of commonality with others and the construction of a sense of self are always problematic, but "communication" is the process in which the problematicity is relieved, or at least "worked on." "Communication" is the solution to the problem of "relationship" (love) and of "self" (personhood). In terms of overcoming personal differences, "communication" functions as the "how of love," the primary vehicle and constituent of a "relationship"; in terms of constructing and validating a "self," "communication" is the "how of self."

Given the cultural meaning and ideational context of "communication," as delineated here, it should be no surprise to find that "communication" finds its quintessential place in the ritual we have described. Like other rituals, the "communication" ritual, by its very enactment, takes as its theme that which is problematic for its performers and constitutes, in its enactment, the solution to the problem. Just as prayer takes as its theme man's separation from God, and solves it through ritual acts of obeisance to a deity, so the "communication" ritual takes as its theme the reality of human separation and solves it through acts of obeisance to the co-construction of selves in and through "communication."

Thus, the "communication" ritual functions to reinforce the unspoken consensus underlying intimate life—an agreement to be *close, supportive,* and *flexible,* and its performance thereby implicates and insinuates the performers in a world of meaning and morality which gives credence and legitimacy to "the relationship." It is this constitutive power of the ritual which makes the fact or the possibility of its performance so poignant.

If various types of cultural performance, such as everyday and public dramas, are "dialectical dancing partners,"[17] then our readings of the everyday lives we have studied should help us to understand the meanings underlying some more public dramas. For example, for us, *The Phil Donahue Show* was made intelligible in the very terms and tropes which color the speech of M and K. Just as a reading of Phil Donahue's autobiography suggests a striking parallelism between the structure and the content of his program and of his life, so his show simultaneously reflects and provides "a rhetoric, a mode of emplotment, and a meaning"[18] which articulates with the ideals espoused by M and K. But the dramatic metaphor fails us here. It is more apt to say that Donahue and company communicate in evangelistic tones. Following a public display of "communication," they endorse it and preach it, apparently to a fervently appreciative audience. That we could find so prominent and so plausible a public use of the code we formulated suggests, not that it is universal in America but that discourse which uses it is *intelligible to* many Americans.

So, we have, as Donahue exhorted his viewer to do, stepped back and looked at what some of the people in this country were saying. We found that a "wholesome adult" in the ideology studied looked suspiciously familiar—he is his own ethnographer. The difference between the ethnographer and the reflective person who can deal with his problems through "communication" is further minimized if we accept Ricoeur's dictum that the aim of ethnography is to reach an understanding of the self via an understanding of the other.[19] Our study of American "communication" has led us to think of ethnography less as a journey into a foreign land or culture, and more as a journey into a no-man's land, which is neither the territory of the self nor of the other. As every Israeli child who was taken on that mandatory field-trip to the border knows, one cannot risk more than a few steps into unsettled territory. In doing so, however, one becomes aware not only of the existence of the other's territory, but of one's own, and of the concept of territory in general. The ethnographer, like the careful tourist, pays his or her tribute to the border at designated spots, but the border stretches and winds between these spots as well, and it is in this unmarked territory that the "person" searches for a sense of personal meaning. The "communication" ritual provides members of the social world we studied a context comparable in import to the ethnographic encounter for the ethnographer, but the sign, if any, would say "exchange station" rather than "border." Thus, despite the territorial metaphors, we hope this study does not read as an exercise in cartography. We

[17]Victor Turner, "Social Dramas and Stories about Them," *Critical Inquiry,* 7 (1980), 159.

[18]Turner, p. 153.

[19]Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," in *Understanding and Social Inquiry,* ed. Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), p. 33.

hope we have not only delineated some of the scenery in that stretch of no-man's land, in that area of heightened consciousness in which our informants told their stories and we made our interpretations, but that we have conveyed as well a sense of possibility for ethnography as perspective and method in human communication.