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**ABSTRACT**

After defining and describing communication from a cultural perspective, this paper then proposes two areas--shared meaning and shared identity--as being relevant in and rich for communication inquiry. The paper addresses these two areas by (1) specifying assumptions for a cultural perspective on communication, (2) defining culture as a communicatively constituted analytic construct, (3) explicating a system of cultural structures that function to generate and regulate shared symbolic meaning, and (4) discussing three discernable communicative forms--ritual, myth, and social drama--that structure a sense of shared identity in interactive life. By advancing a cultural perspective on communication, the paper shows the unique and revealing insights that the study of shared meaning and shared identity offer students of communication theory and research. (FL)

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Toward a Perspective on Cultural Communication

by  
Donal Carbaugh

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## Toward a Perspective on Cultural Communication

Recently, contemporary (Western) interactive life has been under attack. Two focal points of the criticism seem of particular relevance to students of human communication. First, critics claim that, generally, contemporary social and public life is translated into personal or psychological terms to be meaningful. This process, therefore, renders social communicative phenomena problematic.<sup>1</sup> As Richard Sennett has claimed, "all social phenomena, no matter how impersonal in structure, are converted into matters of personality in order to have a meaning."<sup>2</sup> Critics on this theme claim that the meaning in and of interactive life is judged according to individuals' egological standards. Therefore, communicative meaning in Western life is understood as "a matter of personality" or as an individual's cognitive production. If meaning extends only as far as the self extends, as critics claim, then, as a consequence, a sense of shared identity or community suffers. This leads to a second criticism of contemporary interactive life; Westerners participate and experience community life as isolates.<sup>3</sup> As such, the privacy of self conceptions is the focal concern in public interaction. As a result, contemporary interactive life is viewed as an aggregate of selves, a "pool" of public people with little (if any) sense of community, a batch of self-conceptions with minimal shared identity.

These two critical themes suggest particular problems for communication study. First, while some meaning is bound to be individualized, idiosyncratic, and strictly psychological, certainly there are meanings which are, to a degree, shared, common, and public. Some degree of shared meaning is necessary for coordinated communicative acts. Students of communication need to explore

and understand the role of shared meaning in contemporary interaction. Communication inquiry could (and should) be directed by questions, such as, what is the role of shared meaning in a universe of discourse? How is shared meaning generated and regulated in a community of discourse? Second, as Sennett has described, a movement toward individuality and self consciousness has been to some degree, both embraced and nurtured in contemporary speech. But, this trend need not obscure a complementary role in communication as individuals identify with groups, organizations, a community, or some other collective unit. Some collective conversation provides individuals the opportunity to both affiliate with larger social units and achieve some sense of shared identity. For communication study, this suggests the questions; what is the role of communication where individuals develop a sense of shared identity? How is shared identity constituted and reaffirmed in a community of discourse? Both problems outlined here, shared meaning and shared identity, seem to be integral aspects of ordinary conversation. While they coalesce empirically, they can and should be made analytically distinct. As such, they need to be addressed and understood by students of human communication.

Inquiry into shared meaning and shared identity may be placed among three levels of communication systems that seem distinct and complementary as units for critical analysis.<sup>4</sup> First, one may understand interpersonal communication as focusing study on the mutual generation and validation of unique self conceptions. Second, organizational communication seems to focus inquiry on the cooperative organizing of individuals in performing a task. Third, the cultural analysis of communication, described herein, provides a way to discover, describe, and explain the generation and re-affirmation of shared meaning and shared identity in communication processes. Therefore, my major thesis is: a cultural perspective adds unique and complementary insights to the study of

communication by focusing inquiry on the degree of shared meaning and the sense of shared identity constituted in a community of discourse.

This essay stands at the juncture of two distinctive philosophical traditions, ordinary language philosophy and hermeneutic phenomenology.<sup>5</sup> Inquiry is focused, as in these traditions, on the interpretation of conversation as it is practiced in social life. Empirically, this cultural perspective adds a particular focus to the ethnography of communication as a method of describing and explaining situated ways of speaking and, I would add, meaning.<sup>6</sup>

The basic move argued for is an inscriptive one (description and interpretation). I agree with Burke "that the most direct route to the study of human relations and human motives is via a methodical inquiry into cycles or clusters of terms (their meanings) and their functions" (parenthetical comment added).<sup>7</sup> While Burke focuses his study on symbolic activity in general, I propose a particular focus on a type of symbolic activity, the communal conversation, and treat it, as Burke treats symbolic acts, as "a terministic center from which many related considerations can be shown to 'radiate'".<sup>8</sup> To discover and explore "cycles of terms", "terministic centers", cultural systems, and their functions and forms necessitates an exercise in description. To record a speech community's culture (symbols and meanings) a systematic theory of description is essential. While this essay argues for a particular slant in communication research focusing on cultural structures, functions, and forms, the interested reader should complement this perspective with a knowledge of ethnographic description--inscription. The perspective presented here focuses the general move of ethnographic description.<sup>9</sup>

At the onset, it is important to clarify this cultural perspective as socially or intersubjectively based and distinct from those that are cognitively based. The ideational (as opposed to symbolic) approach defines cul-

ture as "the things one needs to know in order to meet the standards of others," or as a system of shared knowledge.<sup>10</sup> This approach can be characterized as drawing a parallel between cultural anthropology and transformational generative grammar, specifically by identifying culture as competence and (communicative) behavior as performance. The focus in the ideational approach, therefore, is placed on an individual's knowledge-competence rather than their performance. Defined as such, cultural analysis analytically reduces communicative behavior to illusive cognitive structures.<sup>11</sup> Defined symbolically, as in this essay, cultural analysis is informed by and directed to socially constituted communication conduct.

I have also avoided referring to the perspective outlined here as a semantic one for most semantic analyses orient to "the systematic study of the meanings of words and the role of these meanings in cognitive systems" (emphasis added).<sup>12</sup> Whereas, the unit of analysis in formal semantic studies, such as ethnoscience, is normally a word or lexeme (and its attendant components),<sup>13</sup> the unit of analysis in cultural studies, as outlined here, is a shared system of symbolic meanings. While the former treats word meaning as linear and causal, the latter treats symbols and meanings as systemic and functional. The difference in approaches is a subtle and significant one.

The purpose of this essay is to explicate culture as an analytic construct or abstraction which reduces communication to 1) an intersubjectively constituted symbolic system that 2) structures a degree of shared meaning while 3) re-affirming and negotiating a sense of shared identity. I will begin with a specification and discussion of four assumptions about communication which underly a cultural perspective. Next, I will define what I mean by culture as an analytic construct. Then, I will define cultural structures and discuss their function in regulating and generating a degree of shared meaning in

communication. Finally, I will examine three prevalent communicative forms where cultural structures are manifested and where individuals confirm and negotiate a group's sense of shared identity. This is not a modest goal, yet I write with hope that the thoughts presented here will contribute to (or stimulate) an understanding of cultural communication conduct.

### Cultural Communication and Communication Theory

The view argued for in this essay presents culture as an abstraction from and ingredient in communication conduct. While the view focuses attention on the shared symbolic meanings in discourse, it also presupposes and implicates a transactional perspective of communication phenomena. In this section, I will sketch four assumptions which underlie the cultural perspective and provide the theoretical foundation for observationally adequate descriptions and explanations of communication conduct.

First, communication processes are understood, here, as intersubjectively generated and regulated phenomena. The functional elements in this first assumption, the generative, regulative, and unifying functions, are discussed below. The intersubjective element of this first assumption focuses inquiry on communication as it functions in a given socio-cultural system, between people. As an intersubjective phenomena, the "said" of discourse is a matter of "co-being", "sociality", or mitsein, to borrow Heidegger's often neglected term.<sup>14</sup> Communication study, as proposed here, focuses on that inextricable bond, the mutual turning-toward-other, the shared aspect of discursive experience. Alfred Schutz has said:

From the outset, we, the actors on the social scene, experience the world we live in as a world both of nature and of culture, not as a private but as an intersubjective one, that is, as a world common to all of us, either actually given or potentially accessible to everyone; and this involves intercommunication and language.<sup>15</sup>

Presupposing intersubjectivity focuses attention on that symbolic system that is common to us and is generated and regulated, between people, communicatively. Defined as such, communication is presented as a social process rather than a cognitive product. Communication processes are viewed, primarily, as a matter of intersubjective convention, not subjective intention.

Secondly, the cultural perspective presented here presupposes communication as a symbolic activity, largely verbal. By symbolic, I mean any activity (gesture, word use, a type of language use) which has, essentially, a dual aspect in that its use is both 1) expressive as it occurs in a context and 2) evocative as it prescribes for an event or act a particular context (according to the history of the symbol's use). In other words, communication as symbolic action is contextualized and, at the same time, contextualizes: symbolic activity is studied, culturally, as it occurs in a context and in what it brings to a context. For example, consider the utterance, "Let's have coffee", which may be (and usually is) described in a context as it fulfills a communicative function, such as an invitation. By treating the act symbolically, the cultural analyst also examines what particular context is discursively preferred or prescribed by the utterance, "Let's have coffee"; what conventional quality or relation is constituted in the utterance? For instance, "Let's have coffee", may discursively evoke a communicative event in ritual form, and fulfill a unifying function while prescribing a context as "relaxing," "normal



chit-chat," and a "break from the normal routine." The distinction in the symbolic aspect is one between a general production in a context and a particular design for a context; the former refers to communication as it is performed in a context, the latter refers to communication as it constitutes a context in its performance; both are essential aspects in treating communication as symbolic activity.<sup>16</sup>

Kenneth Burke has claimed: "the peculiarly human trait is the ability to deal with symbols about symbols. Man acquires conventional symbol-systems."<sup>17</sup> Human communication, defined symbolically, involves that conventional system, particularly those shared meanings as they affect and design communal discourse. It is the goal of the cultural analyst to disclose and explain communication conduct--symbolically--as it is performed and to interpret the situated and particular experiences that are constituted in its performance.

A third assumption I make is: human communication functions, in part, by constituting a community of meanings. The role of meaning and shared understanding in human interaction has been described by a prominent symbolic anthropologist:

Social action...implies common codes of communication; it entails generalized relationships among its parts mediated by human understanding. That one act can have consequences for another is not only a function of the effects of that act: it is also a function of the meaning which that act has for the persons involved.<sup>18</sup>

As one communicates, one institutes and invokes a system of meaning surrounding the symbolic act. One relies on the meanings common to one's group to help make an act coherent and mutually intelligible. Through communicating, one resides in a particular community of symbolic meanings.

The point here is to specify that communication conduct is, to a degree, governed by an intersubjective understanding of what is meaningful. Cultural analysts do not claim that meaning is exclusively intersubjective (though it is near so) or that all intersubjective communication is meaningful. Certainly there are intersubjective interactions which are less than meaningful. Yet, the cultural perspective is concerned with that system of communication behavior which is governed by an intersubjective understanding of what is meaningful. To reiterate an earlier point, communicative meaning is primarily, systemic and functional, not linear or causal.

Finally, I assume that human communication, composed of symbolic meanings, forms a basis for community or a sense of shared identity. If meanings are constituted as a part of communicative conduct and communicative conduct is an intersubjective phenomenon, then meanings are, in some degree, intersubjective; as such they are a matter of social and communicative practice that constitute, for a group of people, a sense of community or shared identity. While discussing the interpretation of meaning in human behavior, Charles Taylor emphasizes the communal aspect of shared meaning.

Common meanings are the basis of community. Intersubjective meaning gives a people a common language to talk about social reality and a common understanding of certain norms, but only with common meanings does this common reference world contain significant common actions, celebrations, and feelings.

These are objects in the world that everybody shares. This is what makes community.<sup>19</sup>

In a community of conversation one practices a type of public interaction through a repertoire of tribal idioms. In the process, one invokes a shared system of meanings that forms the basis of community and provides a sense of shared identity.

The above presuppositions of the communication process are the grounds of a socio-cultural perspective on communication. When combined, human communication is defined as an intersubjectively generated and regulated symbolic activity (largely verbal) which functions, in part, by constituting a public system of meanings that provides a sense of shared identity or community.

### Culture as an Analytic Construct

In this section I will essay what I mean by culture as an analytic construct. In the process, I will discuss several features which are central to an understanding of cultural communication. I will proceed by discussing culture as 1) an irreducible analytic construct consisting of 2) a shared system of symbols and meanings which occur in 3) highly specific forms and are 4) historically grounded.

First, and foremost, I agree with David Schneider in defining culture as an "irreducible analytic construct."<sup>20</sup> To reduce cultural communication to any other system would obscure cultural phenomena. This is not to say that culture operates independently of other systems, for example psychological ones. It is to say that I assume the cultural system, constituted in communication, may be studied on its own and should be studied for its own sake.

In an often quoted phrase, Clifford Geertz has said "that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun," and Geertz takes "culture to be those webs."<sup>21</sup> For students of communication, those "webs of significance" can be translated into a shared "system of symbols and meanings."<sup>22</sup> When I discuss culture as a shared system of symbols and meanings, I intend that both symbols and meanings are, to a degree, common and public. It is important to stress that both symbols and meanings are common and public. Meanings, as well as symbols, are constituted in social life, especially in

communication. Wittgenstein has claimed, and I agree, that "nothing is more wrong-headed than calling meaning a mental activity."<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Geertz makes the point most simply when he argues, "culture is public because meaning is."<sup>24</sup> By deciding that "man's webs of significance" are a shared system of symbols and meanings, I implicate a particular vocabulary or shared system of symbolic meaning in which people communicate. While the remainder of this paper develops this idea, it should be repeated that a cultural analyst reduces communication to a shared system of symbols and meanings.

In any setting where speech is prescribed or appropriate, it is critical that one acquires or has the ability to acquire its cultural or symbolic meaning. By culture I do not mean some general notion, but highly particular codes of symbolic meaning. All people can learn diverse and complex things. What is of interest here is the human capacity to develop highly specific conceptual systems; systems we learn in order to coordinate our lives. Mountain goats traverse cliffs, cougars prowl at night, grizzlies hibernate in winter; these are biologically programmed behaviors conditioned by external stimuli. People learn from, and with, others, how to perform a role, how to climb mountains, or how to praise a common good under the direction of shared symbolic systems which lend a particular organization to what appear to be limitless human abilities. Through speaking, we constitute and learn a shared arrangement of concepts and premises which are situated in highly particular systems of symbolic meaning.

In addition to occurring in highly particular ways, a cultural system should also be understood as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."<sup>25</sup> Culture, so defined, provides a tradition in a way of "sense-making". Through situated ways of speaking, people generate

and perpetuate certain concepts, premises, values, beliefs, and attitudes about their "place" in the world. That highly particular "place" is constituted by a history of cultural codes in communication. As one symbolic (semiotic) anthropologist has claimed; culture organizes an understanding of "the nature of the universe and man's place in it."<sup>26</sup> Culture is that abstraction, those shared systems of symbolic meaning, which construct historically grounded and highly particular views of the world through shared codes in communication conduct.

Imagine, for a moment, overhearing a conversation in which several "foreign" terms are noticed such as, "ding", "bindle stiff", "working stiff", "airedale", "mission stiff", and "nose diver".<sup>27</sup> Pondering at some length over the terms may give little, if any, hint to their significance or meaning. Apparently, most people do not share the cultural system which speaks in these terms and lack a way of placing this speech in a conceptual framework. These particular terms happen to be of great importance to those who use them for they constitute the group's shared terms of identity. Being a "ding," "bindle stiff," "working stiff," "airedale," "mission stiff," or "nose diver" is to be a specific type of tramp. Without sharing this cultural system, the terms are interpreted or understood as incoherent or orderless which signifies a cultural distancing or need of "intercultural negotiation." Recognizing and analyzing this type of shared code, its function, and attendant form, is to embrace and interpret the communal or cultural aspect in communication conduct.

In summary, a cultural analysis reduces communication to a shared system of symbols and meanings which occurs in highly specific forms and is historically grounded. While a system of symbols and meanings may appear, on the surface, both readily accessible and easily understood, it is the goal of the cultural analyst to search the particular ways of speaking and the historical sense of meaning in each communicative performance. The above features should indicate

the scope or domain of cultural communicative phenomena. Yet, how does one begin a cultural analysis? One point of departure is the analysis of cultural structures in communication.

### Cultural Structures in Communication

One of the tenets of this paper is: any community of conversation may be analytically reduced to a shared system of symbols and meanings. Cultural communication, therefore, "consists of socially established structures of meaning."<sup>28</sup> In this section I will outline five phases in the analysis of cultural structures and discuss two communicative functions, the regulative and generative, where cultural structures are manifested.

Cultural structures, or shared arrangements of symbolic meaning, are observable in any communicative act and may be interpreted or analyzed in five general phases. First, the analyst may choose a culturally significant unit (a symbol or a concept, a premise, a gesture, a type of language use) which occurs in a given corpus of communication, in an instance of a community of discourse. For example, in an intimate group terms such as "love", "care", "self", "personality", "family" may be candidates. In an organization, terms like "productivity", "work", "job", "profit", may assume central importance. In a community, one may notice "neighbors", "friends", "those from around here", "the fair", "corn" and so on to be central concepts in talk. Given a selected universe of discourse and guided by a principled research stance, the analyst, then, chooses a culturally significant unit for analysis. Next, s/he examines instances of the use of expressions relevant to the unit being studied. A search is made for expressions which define the unit. This results in a clustering of associated terms or radiants of the unit which begin to structure the unit's shared communicative meaning.<sup>29</sup> Third, the unit, if appropriate, is analyzed

according to its agons or oppositions. The cultural analyst may entertain the question: what opposes or conflicts with this unit? Identifiable opposing units are analyzed, then, referring to their clustering of associated terms. Fourth, a search is made for arbitrary cause and effect relations. This responds to the question, what leads to what in this universe of discourse? The attempt here is to trace "if, then" talking. For instance, "if Susan goes to beauty school, we can expect her to keep dating Bob," "if we hire Jane, she will ignite this place," or "when Bob is elected, the complexion of this town will change." The analyst explores and examines the sequential terms, or systematically recurring causal patterns, evidenced in a community of discourse.<sup>30</sup> Finally, one attempts to place the units in a hierarchical arrangement according to cultural actors' assessments of their value or moral weight as they relate to other culturally significant units. The analysis yields a particular pattern of symbolic meaning, permeated with opposition, arranged sequentially, and mediated by its hierarchical design.

As a shared system of symbols and meanings, culture provides an ordering or structuring of conceptions in any given corpus of speech. While these structures have received various labels such as recipes,<sup>32</sup> webs,<sup>33</sup> causal maps,<sup>34</sup> and terministic screens,<sup>35</sup> I prefer to call them cultural or communicative codes extracted from and functioning in a shared system of symbolic meaning.

Communicative codes may be considered functionally as cultural actors regulate and/or generate symbolic meaning. While the regulative and generative functions of cultural codes may be made analytically distinct, they coalesce empirically as each complements and influences the other. Now, I will discuss and illustrate how these two functions orient to and utilize shared cultural codes in communication.



The regulative function. All judgments, claims of relevance and so on presuppose a context or "place" to which and in which the claim resides. To argue that all acts of communication must be appropriate or relevant to the topic discussed (or general area of concern) is to make a universal and general claim which lacks contextual specificity. If one is uncertain or ignorant of what counts as "relevant" in a particular context of conversation, then one is, at once, culturally and communicatively incompetent. Judgments of relevance, appropriateness, coherence, meaningfulness and so forth reside in a cultural function in communication. Specifically, one aspect of cultural communication may be understood as it regulates judgments of relevance, coherence, and appropriateness through the coordination of symbolic meaning.

Courtrooms often provide an arena in which one meaningfully defines an event by regulating the language or terms (cultural units) used in accounting for the event; therefore, consider the 1975 Edelin trial in which Edelin, an obstetrician-gynecologist, was convicted of manslaughter in connection with a late abortion. Much of the trial consisted in arguing of the proper code (symbol and meaning) used in communicating about the "result of pregnancy." Terms such as "child", "fetus", "subject", "baby", "products of conception", "blob", "big bunch of mucus", "person", "embryo" and so on were discussed regarding their appropriateness as the "result of pregnancy". The jury agreed that the cultural or conceptual system in which to "place" the "aborted material" was that of "person", "male child" and "baby boy". Locating the "result of pregnancy" in this cultural structure resulted in convicting Edelin of Manslaughter.<sup>36</sup> As this example illustrates, particular terms and their meanings were negotiated regarding the "result of pregnancy". One way to interpret and explain this court-room interaction is to analyze the cultural structures (terms, associated terms, oppositional terms, sequential terms, and hierarchical



arrangement of terms) that are manifested there. In the process, the analyst may understand how such cultural codes regulate judgments of appropriateness and coherence in a community of discourse. Seen this way, communal conversation functions, discursively, by regulating moral choices of coherence and order. In making such choices, people regulate, by negotiating and re-affirming, a particular construction of symbolic reality.

The generative function. In discourse, one may create novel conceptions (symbolic meanings) based in and referring to the conventional symbolic system. Recently Campbell has discussed "metaphorizing" (vis-a-vis Ricoeur and Aristotle) as a spoken style which functions to generate (a) new conception(s) by creating rifts in the conventional conceptual system.<sup>37</sup> Through metaphor, novel concepts are created by, simultaneously, affirming traditional aspects of symbol use and inviting new interpretations. In metaphorizing, reality is redefined and re-described (generating symbolic meaning) when listeners are asked to, simultaneously, recall a conventional meaning of a symbol (or more specifically a term) and align it a new way. In the process the cultural system is at once reaffirmed and redefined. As symbolic meanings are successfully altered or created, they are stated in reference to the existing system of meaning.<sup>38</sup> In short, cultural communication may be understood as it generates symbolic meaning by, simultaneously, reaffirming and redefining the existing conceptual system.

As an example I will describe, if you will, a job I had several summers ago as a tour guide in a national park. I worked for an organization which catered, primarily, to retired park visitors. As the summer progressed our staff created special codes referring to our clientele. We talked fondly and privately about our retired park visitors as "raisins", invoking the age and texture implied by the conventional use of that term. Our convertible tour busses were dubbed "sun maids" associating them with a well-known brand-name

of raisins. When a tour bus would deliver a group of "raisins" or visitors to our restaurants, the event was called a "raisin rush". As a person responsible for guiding the "raisins" through this western park, I became a "raisin wrangler". By referring to a shared cultural system we could generate these codes, in our talk, to make mutually intelligible the focus of our work duties. And to be sure, as the codes were instituted, they regulated our work talk and unified staff.

By referring to conventional cultural structures insight into novel communicative acts may be gained. Creative communicative codes may be interpreted and analyzed (perhaps even designed) as they invoke and re-arrange, therefore metaphorically generate, symbolic meaning. The cultural analyst, interested in the generation of communicative codes, examines the codes as they draw from, re-organize, and add to a shared system of symbolic meaning.

In summary, I have argued that an aspect of human communication involving some degree of shared meaning may be productively discovered, described, and explained by reducing a community of discourse to cultural structures.<sup>39</sup> A five-step method for analyzing cultural structures was suggested. It involves 1) locating a culturally significant unit(s), or symbol(s), in a community of discourse, 2) searching for associated terms relevant to the unit being studied, 3) when appropriate, identifying opposing terms, 4) exploring the discourse for relevant sequential terms or recurring causal patterns, and 5) placing the units in a hierarchical arrangement according to their moral value or weight. Finally, cultural structures were discussed as performing regulative and generative functions in communal conversation.

### Some Forms of Cultural Communication

Communicative forms result as cultural structures and functions combine in communal conversation. Cultural discourse not only regulates and generates the fundamental structures or content (symbols and meanings) of a particular group, but also occurs in particular forms. Although cultural structures and functional performances differ from place to place, there are discernible communicative forms which re-affirm and negotiate a sense of shared identity. Three forms discussed here as they fashion a cultural system through unifying cultural participants, are ritual, myth, and social drama.<sup>40</sup>

Ritual, as a communication form, occurs, quintessentially, as a structured sequence of symbolic acts which provides a cooperative way to solve common problems, often by paying homage to a sacred object. In other words, a communication event designed to solve a people's shared problems by honoring a sacred object occurs in ritual form. In a recent analysis of American culture Katriel and Philipsen have described the "communication" ritual. The focus in this ritual are the problems which a "self" is experiencing, and how they are managed in some American speech. The purpose of this ritual is to dissolve the "problem" by validating the focal participant's view of the problem and their self-concept. Those who participate in the communication ritual are considered by the initiator to be intimates and, therefore, part of the problem and its resolution. They claim the following sequence forms this ritual:

- 1) Initiation--getting together and talking of a problem
- 2) Acknowledgement--focusing energy on the initiator's problem
- 3) Negotiation--the initiator discloses about the problem and  
is open to change as others empathize, nonjudgmentally
- 4) Reaffirmation--mediating and resolving any discord

The ritual occurs in a private setting where talk is the focus.<sup>41</sup> Participating in this ritual orients to a self's problem which is an instance in the class of problems all American's face. In the process the sacred object, the self, is honored and validated.

As a communication form, ritual functions, primarily, to regulate activity surrounding common problems and unifies individuals through their aligned performance. The performance is normally affectively imbued and governed by a restricted or rigid code of unspoken consensus. As such, ritual is the solidification of common rules in discourse, essential for social order, and utilized in a group's solving common problems often by honoring a sacred object.<sup>42</sup>

Rituals, therefore, provide us with 1) models of what to believe, what to celebrate, as evoked by the cultural structures in the event, and 2) models for believing by establishing the appropriate sequencing of symbolic acts.<sup>43</sup>

Myth, as a communication form, occurs within a looser texture of symbolic meaning. A myth is a great symbolic narrative which represents the unity and exclusiveness of those who articulate, accept, or respect it. If a ritual's symbolic meaning stems, primarily, from a structuring of symbolic acts in which to perform, then a myth's symbolic meaning results from a community's explaining a sense of life to themselves; it provides a type of cultural "uni-form", a shared means to order or shape coherence. A recent analysis by Daniel and Smitherman, "Communication Dynamics in the Black Community", articulates a traditional African World View.<sup>44</sup> In their report, the great symbolic narrative of the traditional Black is formulated; a particular system of symbolic meaning is specified. They say:

The conception is that of a dynamic, hierarchical unity between the spiritual and material aspects of life. Specifically, there is a unity between God, man, and nature, with God

serving as the head of the hierarchy. God is followed by lesser deities, spirits, man, other forms of life, and things. Man resides in the middle of the hierarchy, and as such, he is composed of both a spiritual and material self...the fundamental sense of causation being spiritual.<sup>45</sup>

These students of Black life see this narrative or myth most clearly in the call-response ritual of the traditional Black church which, they claim, is the sustenance of the culture and communication process of African-Americans.

Myths need not declare a fully-developed world view. One need only observe several television advertisements to discern an American myth of beauty, or several prime-time serials and daily newspapers to see how violence is explained, or survey some popular movies for the mythic expression of interpersonal relations and communication.

A myth is that great symbolic narrative we use to explain a sense of ourselves to ourselves. As a communication form, myth provides symbolic maps for human groups, shared perceptions of sentiment, systems of folk beliefs. The mythical narrative provides an informal logic of its own which is accessible to and in the communal conversation. Myths, as they are spoken or symbolically acted, translate common aspirations and fears into mutually intelligible sequences. Through myth, a cultural integrity is cultivated, a sense of unity is articulated and respected as a particular system of symbols and meanings is adopted in, or adapted to, the cultural participants.

Social drama, as a communication form, is processual. Social dramas occur in an arena where actors orient to a particular problem or misuse in the symbolic system and, therefore, negotiate, transform, and/or reaffirm the community's cultural standards. While ritual and myth occur as somewhat restricted

forms, social drama manifests a more elaborated form. Victor Turner has discussed social drama as unfolding, generally, in four phases: breach; crisis; redressive action; re-integration or recognition of schism.<sup>46</sup> Initially, a breach occurs, a violation of a cultural code. Following the breach, a phase of crisis ensues in which community member's symbolic activity orients and attends to the violation. After the crisis, some redressive action occurs when the violator or his/her representative explains the violation by placing it within the cultural system, by assigning it a particular sense of coherence or symbolic meaning. Finally, the violator is reintegrated into the community or a social schism is recognized. Through these or similar phases, the communal conversation negotiates and confirms the moral boundaries of interpersonal life. Court-room scenes, as the Edelin trial discussed above, provide illustrations of social drama as a communicative form. Social drama, therefore, is essential to communal life for it provides the arena in which to change, redefine or reaffirm the community's moral charter.

In summary, ritual forms a unifying symbolic sequence where cultural participants coordinate performance and celebrate the sacred; myth provides a powerful symbolic story which explains a sense of shared identity to be cultivated, potentially, by all group members as a type of cultural "uniform"; social drama provides the form wherein violations are recognized and negotiated as the community's moral boundaries are reaffirmed or redefined. Undoubtedly there are other cultural forms, yet with these three, ritual, myth, and social drama, a community of discourse may be interpreted and understood as it embraces and/or negotiates a sense of shared identity.

The performance of cultural communicative forms implies a, fundamentally, regnant or unifying function. Whenever the above, and similar, forms occur with reasonable success there is a unification through the discursive force of

shared cultural codes. Through this ability, individuals produce a sense of shared identity, affiliate with one another or group of others. Initiating and recognizing these communicative forms helps individuals reaffirm an identity with particular groups (or others). In this sense, cultural communicative forms provide a regnant or unifying function for individuals.

I should make clear that culture as a unifying (as well as regulating and generating) function is observable and analyzable at many social levels. The function may implicate a culture--generally--such as American culture. In a recent analysis of symbolic life in American culture, Varenne has argued that three units, individualism, community and love, function together by unifying Americans in speech.<sup>47</sup> Varenne argues that talk of individualism often revolves around the term, "self", emphasizing psychological uniqueness, voluntary choice and personal identity; community, on the other hand, is communicated with terms such as "everybody" and emphasizes unity, universality and common purpose; love is spoken of as "happiness" and is a result of a satisfactory mediation or synthesis of individualism (self) and community (everybody). Analyzing talk in this way is to interpret an interactive unity that Americans share; it is to understand an American sense of shared identity.

On a less general level, Katriel and Philipsen have examined the cultural category, "communication", as it is used in some American speech.<sup>48</sup> To claim a need to "communicate" is to call upon the cultural resources of others in particular ways, namely, to be "open", "supportive", "real" and to "really talk". Those who recognize and orient to this use of "communication" (and associated terms) demonstrate a commonality in sharing a cultural category, "communication". Katriel and Philipsen argue that these Americans comprise a significant part of American culture in their use and performance of the cultural unit, "communication". The "communication" code constitutes a unifying cultural function by affirming a commonality or shared identity in some American speech.



The unifying function in cultural communication is also evidenced on a micro-level in the use of personal idioms which appear to promote cohesiveness, closeness and pair-bonding in intimate relationships.<sup>49</sup> By initiating codes which are used and mutually intelligible within smaller groups (intimate couples, family groups) only, one emphasizes and capitalizes on the unifying function in this particular group's cultural communication.<sup>50</sup>

Given any group with which one identifies, be it a dyad, family, organization or nation, through a communal conversation is constituted a particular set of codes which produce and affirm each member's identification with the group. In this sense, cultural communication functions by unifying individuals, educating a shared identity.

I should note that the unifying function may be used as a distancing mechanism. One may wish to exclude certain individuals from talk by using a particular cultural code which those individuals would not understand-yet others, whom one wishes to include, would understand. As a result, cultural communication unifies those who share the communicative code and distances or excludes those who do not.

I began this section by stating that, communicative forms result as cultural structures and functions combine in communal conversation. It is important to reiterate this point by emphasizing that an analysis of communicative forms necessitates an inquisition into cultural structures. In summarizing, I will state this section's major point, which is: an analysis of cultural communication may be guided by at least three forms, ritual, myth, and social drama. Each form, I claimed, is composed of certain symbolic sequences and structures that constitute a sense of unity or shared identity in interactive life. I argued that these forms are observable at several levels, from dyadic to societal, or wherever individuals share a common interactive life.



Kenneth Burke has stated, while introducing his "theory of entitlement", that verbal spirits, or essences, may be derived from "the forms of language and from the group motives that language possesses by reason of its nature as a social product".<sup>51</sup> By recognizing and interpreting a group's symbolic forms a sophisticated understanding of the community's conversation and motivation may be enhanced. The analysis of cultural communicative forms may be utilized in several ways. As Geertz says:

one can start anywhere in a culture's repertoire of forms and end up anywhere else. One can stay...within a single, more or less bounded form, and circle steadily within it. One can move between forms in search of broader unities or informing contrasts. One can even compare forms from different cultures to define their character in reciprocal relief. But whatever level at which one operates, and however intricately, the guiding principle is the same: societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations.<sup>52</sup>

And those interpretations, I might add, reside in cultural communicative behavior, its structures and its attendant forms.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed two problems, shared meaning and shared identity, as relevant in and rich for communication inquiry. By advancing a cultural perspective of communication, and defining culture as a communicatively constituted analytic construct, I attempted to show 1) how an analysis of cultural structures, as well as regulative and generative functions, yields an understanding of shared meaning in communication, and 2) how an analysis of communicative forms such as ritual, myth, and social drama provide an insight

into how individuals unite, or acquire a sense of shared identity.

While any individual in a context is bound to certain idiosyncracies which he or she alone may recognize, it is the goal of the cultural analyst of communication to locate, interpret, and explain those systematic patterns of symbolic meaning which individuals share. Discovering and describing these components in the communication process allow for the recognition and cultivation of the communal sense in speech; a sense which many critics of contemporary interactive life fear has died. If individuals validate self uniqueness through interpersonal communication and band together to perform a common task in organizational communication, then they constitute and reaffirm a sense of shared meaning and identity through cultural communication. It is the goal of the cultural perspective to contribute to communicative knowledge by embracing, analyzing, and understanding the shared codes in which people constitute, negotiate, and reaffirm a sense of shared meaning and identity in contemporary interactive life.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Keller, The Homeless Mind, (NY: Vintage Books, 1973), 185-186.

<sup>2</sup> For a historical treatment of the narrowing of the communal or public realm of discourse in Western society and its attendant difficulties see Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 219.

<sup>3</sup> Sennett, 299-300.

<sup>4</sup> Donald P. Cushman and Robert T. Craig, "Communication Systems: Interpersonal Implications," in Explorations in Interpersonal Communication, Gerald R. Miller, ed. (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1976), 42-46.

<sup>5</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences (ed. by John B. Thompson), Cambridge University Press, 1981, especially 101-128; Hans-George Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, trans. and ed. by David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), especially 59-68; Karl-Otto Apel has argued that communication is a priori in developing intersubjective understanding and in the process locates communication as the central focus for hermeneutic inquiry. For this discussion see Apel, "The A Priori of Communication and the Foundation of the Humanities," in Understanding and Social Inquiry, Fred Dallmayr and Thomas McCarthy, eds., (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 292-315; for a review on hermeneutics, see John Stewart, Philosophy of Qualitative Inquiry: Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Communication

Research, Quarterly Journal of Speech, 67(1981), 109-121. An argument for ordinary language philosophy most closely aligned with this cultural perspective is presented in Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1958).

6

My use of the phrase "the ethnography of communication" is based on the programmatic essays of Dell Hymes, specifically, "Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life," in Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication, John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, eds. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1972), 35-71; for the utility and necessity of systematic design in ethnographic research see Gerry Philipsen, "Linearity of Research Design in Ethnographic Studies of Speaking," Communication Quarterly, 25(1977), 42-50.

7

Kenneth Burke, "Dramatism", in International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, VII, 1968, 445. Burke's articulation of dramatism, symbolic action, and the dramatistic pentad have contributed, significantly, to the development of the ethnographic analysis of cultural communication. See his Language as Symbolic Action, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 3-24, and A Grammar of Motives, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

8

Burke, "Dramatism", 445.

9

For a definition in ethnographic description see Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), especially 1-30,

and his article, "From the Native's Point of View," in Meaning in Anthropology, ed. by K.R. Bassa and H.A. Selby (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), 221-237. The ethnographic inscribing of communication is unlike that group of scholars proposing universal patterns for speech use, such as P. Brown and S. Levinson, "Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena," in Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction, ed. by E. Goody (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 56-310, and E. Schegloff, "Sequencing in Conversational Openings," in Gumperz and Hymes, 1972; or universal standards for speech use, such as J. Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), and H.P. Grice, "The Logic of Conversation," in Syntax and Semantics Volume 3: Speech Acts, ed. by P. Cole and J. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975), 41-58.

10 Ward Goodenough, Culture, Language, and Society, (Menlo Park, California: The Benjamin Cummings Publishing Company, Inc., 1981), especially 47-59; also see R. Keesing and F. Keesing, New Perspectives in Cultural Anthropology, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 19-24. R. Keesing has recently discussed the language-culture connection in "Linguistic Knowledge and Cultural Knowledge: Some Doubts and Speculations," American Anthropologist, 81(1979), 14-36.

11 A similar critique of cognitive analyses is presented by R. Burling, "Cognition and Componential Analysis: God's Truth or Hocus-pocus?," American Anthropologist, 66(1964), 20-28.

12 Paul Kay, in Carol Eastman, Aspects of Language and Culture, (Novato, California: Chandler and Sharp Pub. Inc., 1980), 86. For an introduction to

ethnoscience, ethnographic semantics, or ethnosemantics refer to Eastman's discussion on 85-109.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 97-99, and, Burling, 20-28.

<sup>14</sup> F.R. Dallmayr, "Heidegger on Intersubjectivity," Human Studies: A Journal for Philosophy and the Social Sciences, 3(1980), 221-246.

<sup>15</sup> Alfred Schutz, "Concept and Theory Formation in the Social Sciences," in Dallmayr and McCarthy, 229.

<sup>16</sup> A related discussion of symbolizing and its dual aspect appears in Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 91-94.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Burke, "Dramatism," in Communication: Concepts and Perspectives, ed. by Lee Thayer (London: Macmillan and Co., 1967), 356. For another discussion on the uniqueness of human symbolizing see Burke's "Definition of Man," in Language as Symbolic Action, especially 3-9, and R. Fiordo's interpretation of "Kenneth Burke's Semiotic," Semiotica, 23(1978), 53-75.

<sup>18</sup> David Schneider, "Notes Toward a Theory of Culture," in Meaning in Anthropology, ed. by K.R. Basso and H.A. Selby (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), 198.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in Dallmayr and McCarthy, 122.

20 Schneider, 198.

21 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 5.

22 Schneider, 198.

23 Ludwig Wittgenstein, 172. For a full appreciation of this point one must peruse Part I in this text.

24 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 12.

25 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 84.

26 Schneider, 203.

27 Example from James P. Spradley, You Owe Yourself a Drunk: An Ethnography of Urban Nomads, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1970).

28 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 12.

29 For a related discussion of the ordinary language philosophical method see John Stewart, Rhetoricians of Language and Meaning: An Ordinary Language Philosophy Critique, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California, 1970, 155.

30 For a discussion of causal loops related to this idea see Karl Weick, The Social Psychology of Organizing, (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Pub. Co., 1979), 65-88.

31 An application of an analagous method to a series of John F. Kennedy's speeches was done by Carol Berthold, "Kenneth Burke's Cluster-Agon Method: Its Development and an Application," Central States Speech Journal, 27(1976), 302-309.

32 Goodenough, 81-84.

33 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 5.

34 Weick, 65-88.

35 Burke, Language as Symbolic Action, 44-62.

36 A more detailed analysis of the "war of words" in this trial is presented by Brenda Danet, "'Baby' or 'fetus'? Language and the construction of reality in a manslaughter trial," Semiotica, 32(1980), 187-219.

37 John Campbell, On the Centrality of the Spoken Word. Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association, Anaheim, California, 1981, 5-9.

38 See Schneider, 204-205, for a related discussion of the generative function.



39

The element of explanation suggested here demands further comment. My current work in this area involves a framework for "cultural specification" and/or "cultural style". I should note that this phase of analysis presupposes the more elaborate inscription addressed in this paper.

40

An earlier and related discussion of these three forms in cultural communication occurs in Gerry Philipsen, *The Prospect for Cultural Communication*. Paper presented at the seminar on Communication Theory from Eastern and Western Perspective, Honolulu, Hawaii, December, 1980, 6-9.

41

Tamar Katriel and Gerry Philipsen, "What we need is "communication": "Communication" as a Cultural Category in some American Speech," Communication Monographs, 48 (1981), 301-317.

42

Raymond Firth has treated the processes of greeting and parting as symbolic rituals in his book, Symbols: Public and Private, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1973), 299-327; a brief account of the Sherpas' offering rituals as communicative means to solve common problems is presented in F. Allan Hanson, "The Semiotics of Ritual," Semiotica, 33(1980), 160-178.

43

Clifford Geertz discusses this dual aspect in ritual, model of and for, as "cultural performances" which provide a "symbolic fusion of ethos and world view," The Interpretation of Cultures, 112-114.

44

J.L. Daniel and G. Smitherman, "How I Got Over: Communication Dynamics in the Black Community," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62(1976), 26-29.

45 Daniel and Smitherman, 29.

46 Victor Turner, "Social Dramas and Stories about Them," Critical Inquiry, 7(1980), 141-168.

47 Herve Varenne, Americans Together, (New York: Columbia University Teachers College Press, 1977).

48 Katriel and Philipson, 1981.

49 Robert Hopper, Mark Knapp, and Lorel Scott, "Couples' Personal Idioms: Exploring Intimate Talk," Journal of Communication, 31(1981), 23-33.

50 The use of cultural analyses in intimate settings may seem inappropriate to some readers. Keep in mind that by culture, I mean a shared system of symbols and meanings observable in dyads, on the micro extreme, to nations or perhaps even a global group, on the macro extreme. The idea of an intimate culture has received some recognition in the journal, Psychiatry, and in popular press as R.W. Betcher writes, "The private language, rituals, and shared sense of humor of a couple may constitute a 'culture of two,'" in K.C. Cole, "Couples that Play," Psychology Today, February, 1982, 35.

51 Kenneth Burke, Language as Symbolic Action, 361.

52 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 453.