

# The Challenge to Sociological Practice

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This article presents a synthetic model for ethical communicative systems. It is posited that the essential characteristics of ethical communicative systems are caring or nurturing rather than abusive.

The sociological practitioner faces the difficult task of creating environments where ethical communicative practices are facilitated and unethical practices are deconstructed. Such environments are difficult to achieve because most of us grew up in family and institutional settings which were abusive (unethical). (Note that the term "unethical" here is used according to the ideal type construct of the author. What is here considered "unethical" may be deemed normal or even ethical practice in the existing cultural systems.)

Along family lines generations of adult "boys" marry adult "girls" and therefore are unlikely to be empathic, mirroring, congruent, authentic, caring, integrated, competent communicators who use mature defense mechanisms such as sublimation and altruism. This situation becomes self-perpetuating over generations. Given environmental stresses, such as unemployment or unresponsive work

environments, many people will tend to act out either against themselves (as in eating, drinking or drug disorders) or against others (as in violent abuse or the infliction of negative emotional climates).

The establishment of an ethical communicative system can be accomplished through modeling and implementing ethical, communicative practices in all relationships. An ethical, caring, self-reflective stance, for a sociological practitioner, is essential to lay the foundation for an ethical system.

## The Caring or Ethical Communicative System

There are eleven aspects to caring, ethical communicative relationships: secure social bonds; an authentic temporal experience; empathy; adequate mirroring; positive and clear attributions and expectations; competent communication; congruent communication; comedy as a dramatic model; caring as a basis for moral judgement; mature defense mechanisms; and self-control, artistry and love.

A strong bond exists in ethical communicative relationships which is both stable and stimulating. The primal patterns of movement, rhythm and tone are

continuous and provide variations from soothing calm to safe excitement. There are no violent emotional or physical interactions. The full range of emotions is expressed and responded to empathically, avoiding projection, reversal and double image constitutions.

Ethical relationships avoid blaming, placating, irrelevant and objectivistic communicative patterns. Instead there is clear communication of feelings, thoughts, expectations and hopes (leveling). The communicative atmosphere is a competent one in Habermass sense, exhibiting truth, truthfulness, understandability and comprehensibility. It is not distorted or pseudo due to power distortions. People regularly use mature to neurotic defenses (sublimation, altruism, anticipation, humor, suppression). They do not act out or use denial, hypochondria, or passive-aggressive strategies.

The dramatic environment is comic in form that is, all are participants with unique but acceptable foibles. Roles are not crystallized along hero-scapegoat lines. Leadership and authority are shared openly, and fantastic heroic (positive) or villainous/scapegoat lines. Leadership and authority are

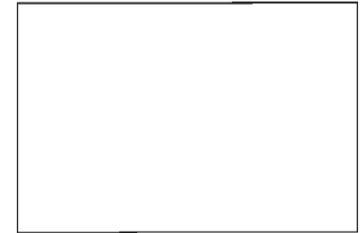
shared openly, and fantastic heroic (positive) or villainous/scapegoat (negative) attributions or others in leadership roles are actively interpreted and deconstructed. Through gentle and unpossessive love, self-control and artistry are fostered.

Because of this atmosphere of mutual support, the level of moral action tends towards caring, as people nurture themselves and each other. Time is experienced in a free, authentic manner through celebrations, meaningful rituals, and events which mark the importance of their shared lives. Members of ethical social systems experience together the full gambit of emotional life, from joy to mourning. Through congruent communication, they do not lead emotional double lives.

## The Unethical or Abusive Communicative System

In contrast to an ethical communicative social system, an unethical system is characterized as follows: bonds are fractured by violent emotions, withdrawal, or coldness, either directly expressed or hidden under a cloak of pseudo politeness. Each person strategically attempts to use the situation and the others

## *Creating Caring, Ethical, Communicative Systems within Abusive, Unethical Social Environments*



in it to meet his or her needs. Each feels that his or her needs can only be met at the expense of others, in a win/lose (or at least competitive) struggle. People communicating abusively inflict and project their violent and negative emotions on each other and/or on external scapegoats. Destructive communicative patterns take subtle forms such as lecturing or dominating conversations where reactions of others range from self-destructive passivity to boredom to repressed rage. Individuals consequently harbor emotionally divided selves, being unable to recognize and experience genuine emotions in themselves or in each other.

Unacceptable or fearful emotions are repressed and pseudo-selves emerge. Alcohol, drugs, diets, television, movies, addictive relationships and body building bolster false and narcissistic self constructs. Such selves may be sentimental or act kindly, but they cannot be ethical because they do not distinguish authentic experience from marketing strategies, or make independent judgements. When grandiose expectations fail, depression follows, and the vicious cycle of contempt continues.

Communicative patterns

of blaming, placating, irrelevancy or intellectual avoidance abound, crystallizing into role patterns. As a result, negative or confused messages of attributions and expectations are made. The me of the self thus tends to be negative or split. Emotional release is provided temporarily through direct or mediated indirect participation in sex and violence. Strategic and pseudo communication flourish, as each member struggles for his or her share of the limited emotional resources and rewards available in this resource-debilitating social system.

In unethical social systems, the dramatic action takes a heavy, tragic tone. Scapegoats or victims provide constant opportunities to dump unwanted emotional projections and garbage. These victims range from scapegoated groupmembers to enemies in a war. Feelings of bitterness and resentment are experienced by all who feel shortchanged and unappreciated. In these kinds of everyday situations, the level of moral judgement exhibited is survival (where no resources are available to help the members) to goodness (where the person sacrifices herself to garner an ounce of appreciation).

(Gilligan) All feel like victims of Shylock, who demands a first pound of flesh, and then another. Time is experienced in an unauthentic manner as constant pressure and stress. Little opportunity for experiencing time as authentic flow is allowed.

### **Social Organization**

Ethical communicative systems require a social structure consisting of community, ethical communication, and authenticity.

The accelerated tempo of modern life and the number of responses and interactions required has a negative effect on well-being and the quality of relationships (Simmel 1950, Engelmann 1966). The difficulty of maintaining the "pedal point" of ties to primary others is evident in situations of geographic mobility, where parents are frequently located across the country from their children and grandchildren.

Huertas-Jorda treats the cultural level as the realm of the "proto-symbolic." This includes ideals, myths, legends, beliefs, values, and the practices which give them form. Relatedness to the "proto-symbolic" is essential for any adequately developed self. Many people do not attend

church or do so ritualistically. Even for the ardent churchgoer, the awe and majesty of religious symbols is difficult to maintain against the onslaught of scientific materialism and the demystifying realism within religious institutions. When religion takes the same format as most television programs, complete with commercials, it is questionable whether it can meet the need for meaning and connectedness. Among the other social institutions to which one may look for "proto-symbolic" ties are the arts, politics, education, and sports. Each of these institutions in modern society has been criticized for depersonalization, bureaucratization, and domination by the market.

Communities in which meaningful cultural identities may be generated and maintained are threatened in modern mass society. According to Huertas-Jorda, ethnic neighborhoods should be fostered and encouraged because people can feel most at home and centered in such communities. Huertas-Jorda favors a pluralistic rather than "melting pot" approach to social organization.

George Herbert Mead hypothesized that in playing organized games, the child

recognizes the existence of the "they"—an abstract other who makes the rules by which games are played. Mead saw the great importance of an expanded, generalized other as a source for an improved moral order and for the development of ever more ethical selves (Broyer 1978). However, the existence of a generalized other as hypothesized by Mead is questionable. A study of the development of self in 300 college students found that most of them did not possess a "generalized other" in Mead's sense. Rather, they thought of their actions in relation to their immediate friends and other reference groups (Malhotra 1977).

Habermas' theory of communicative competency and the necessary assumptions of truth, truthfulness, understandability, and comprehensibility provide an additional critique of social context. These norms are violated in a pervasive manner in everyday life. Advertising is an art of deception where school glue is used in place of milk to make cereal bounce and where products which are supposed to be nourishing are harmful. Strategic communication as a means to an end abounds and replaces symbolic interaction. People no longer participate in conversations where they discover mutual interests. Rather, they are divided into two groups: managers and clients of "total institutions" (Habermas 1973).

Duncan's concept of "I-It" communication provides a

model for how he self relates to society. In "I-It" communication one addresses "God," "Humanity," "Nation," "Motherhood," or some other abstract principle of social order. In prayer, religious ritual, meditation, or exhortation, one attempts to communicate with the gods in suitable linguistic form. As Jim Jones and the Jonestown tragedy illustrated so well, such attempts may easily become distorted and used to justify terror (Wooden 1981). Duncan contended that religious is a source of mystification. He scorned "revelations" which cannot be answered—where edicts are issued and no dialogue is possible—as justifying scapegoating, repression, and terror in the name of whatever god or other "sacred" principle is evoked.

Duncan's dramatic sociology (1962) provides critique of the context of institutions and organizations. Social organization in the tragic mode is rigidly hierarchical. The rules of those in power cannot be broken without resulting in guilt and victimization to restore the balance of power. To repair the damage without changing the rules and hence the hierarchy, a scapegoat must be found, vilified, and punished or persecuted. The victim may be an aspect of the self or an outward projection, as in persecutions of homosexuals and welfare recipients.

Repressive work organizations abound and place their employees under stringent controls. Such environments fit a

tragic communications model. They make people less likely to be altruistic (Vaillant 1977) and more likely to blame, placate, project, or be objectivistic (Satir 1983). People working in such organizations will tend to repress their emotions or express them through acting out, denial, or physical illnesses. They will be less likely to provide an ethically and emotionally mature home environment for their children since they must work all week and worship on Saturdays or Sundays in contexts which mitigate against emotional and ethical maturation.

Organizations structured along the lines of comedy, according to Duncan, will still have rules and hierarchies, but they will be subject to negotiation and change. All will be seen as humanly imperfect, and mistakes and foibles will be matters for gentle shared laughter, followed by agreed-upon change. The comic scapegoat is the clown, who is not tortured and killed but is laughed with, a source of enlightened joy. Comedy is shared laughter at our common imperfections.

Applying Weinstein's guidelines to ethical becoming in organizations reveals that many of them inhibit ethical growth. Most organizations do not provide for the cultivation of self-control, as controls are externally imposed. They do not appreciate and reward artistry,

but conformity. Many work organizations view their employees as objects to be manipulated or controlled. This attitude rules out love in Weinstein's ethical schematic. People in such organizations are thus forced to act according to an ethic of survival, or perhaps "goodness," but are not encouraged to achieve a balance of care for self and others in Gilligan's sense. As a result, defenses commonly practiced in these organizational environments will run the gambit from the psychotic to the immature to the neurotic in Vaillant's sense, rarely reaching the mature level where altruism and sublimation are common.

Intersocietal and international relations reflect this behavior in a macrocosmic level. The nuclear arms race and undercover wars to "protect" perceived interests of the power elite are outstanding examples. Fear and aggression are channelled outside of the system, reinforcing paranoia internally. Denial is used on a massive level so that daily life may continue under the threat of total annihilation of all life.

## **Technology and the Divided Self**

For Heidegger, the Meadian "generalized other" is not benign, but a source of inauthenticity. "They," "Das Man," swallows one up in

pettiness, gossip, and curiosity about matters of no real consequence (Malhotra 1987). Children are particularly vulnerable to being absorbed in such inauthenticity. Television, computers, machines, plastic toys, and gadgets fill in the gaps where awareness might have flowered. Death is denied. The mass media and the supermarket mitigate against the child's appreciation of objects and beings in relation to Heidegger's fourfold of earth, sky, mortals, and immortals.

For example, a person seen as an object is viewed inauthentically as a means to an end, a player of roles. The person as a being in the world must be seen in relation to a particular part of the earth from which she came, in relation to the sun and stars and the air which bring cycles of life and meaning. She must exist in conscious and solicitous relation to others who live in the present as well as to historical predecessors. The technologizing of all objects and persons as objects reduces all to their instrumental value.

Heidegger's "deep ecology" provides a critique of the social context in which technology reigns supreme. The essence of modern technology is "Das Gestell," the "standing reserve." All objects, nature, and

people are viewed and used by technology as resources for exploitation. Forests are not wonderlands filled with mystery, beauty, and awe. They are not respected as homes for millions of wondrous creatures. Rather, they are lumber reserves. People are not beings to be enlightened, but bodies to fill slots in the technological system through appropriate occupational training. Objects are only objects for use.

The child herself, in the technologized society, is viewed from the pre-natal stage onward as part of "Das Gestell." The amniotic sack is penetrated to detect early malformations. Sound wave graphs and x-rays are made of the fetus. Labor is often induce or a Caesarean section performed if the birth does not fit the desired timetable. Contractions are counted. Medications are measured. At birth the child is measured and weighed against the standards. Movements become "developmental tasks" and records are kept of the first smiles, crawls, and walks.

The medical institution commands center stage in the early life of the infant. For those certified to be medically "normal," this concern is transferred to the day care center, nursery school, and then the educational system.

## Unethical and Ethical Social Systems

<i>Unethical System</i>	<i>Ethical System</i>
Das man (the rule of anonymous power)	Authentic caring
Das Gestell (the world as the standing reserve for technological use)	The world as appreciated in the fourfold of earth, sky, mortals and immortals
Rational-purposive action	Symbolic interaction
Power saturated communication and strategic communication understandability	Competent communication (truth, truthfulness, comprehensibility)
Material resources inadequate	Material resources plentiful
Fractured and/or routinized relationships	Social relationships stable and stimulating
Relationships between organizations (ruthless)	Fair and just interorganizational relationships
Projective, reversal and double-image relationship between societies and institutions and towards nature	Caring relationship between societies and institutions and towards nature
Vicious cycle of contempt in institutional/intercultural relations	Empathic understanding between cultures
Organization communication: blaming, placating, irrelevant objectivistic	Communication congruent
Tragic model of social organization	Comic model of social organization
Survival and/or goodness primary ethical grounds for organizations	"Caring" ethics between organizations
Acting out encouraged politically and economically	Altruism encouraged and practiced
Time pressured, clocked	Flow of rich, shared, temporal experiences
Release from time constraints artificially induced	Festivals as community
Religious institutions repressive, hierarchical, restrictive; foster defensive reaction formations, divided selves, splits	Religions foster communities, appreciative relationships integrated
Educational institutions foster	Educational institutions foster