

CMN 630: PSYCHOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION

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Please note: I am often in my office. Please stop by any time without an appointment if you want.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

When we think of a course called, "Psychology of Communication" we typically conjure up images of examining what *causes* a person act and think as s/he does -- what is going on **inside** a person's head or what is happening in a person's environment that accounts for his or her behavior. For some reason we tend to think that a course like this is the place where we will learn how to *know* what people are *really* doing when they act in a certain way or what people *really* mean when they say something.

This course is, in fact, about *knowing* but is not about getting inside someone's head. Nor is this course about getting at what *really* is going on (as if there were some *one* thing to know). Where most approaches to knowing others' meanings assume that we must get inside their heads or we must get at what they are *really* thinking and *really* doing, in this course, we will assume that the only way to *know* is to examine what people **do together** (thus looking at joint activities). To this end, our concern is with how we cooperatively construct what we know **with others in conversation**. This includes the construction of ourselves (our identities), our institutions, our relationships, and our beliefs. Consequently, if we describe all that is real or true or good to us as constructed in conversation with others, then we begin to appreciate and recognize that there are multiple truths, realities, and possibilities and never one that is universally certain and right.

In this course we will chart some of the central ways in which theorists have approached and understood social relations. We will also talk about how these descriptions of social interaction have been played out in our everyday understanding and approach to day to day life. That is, we will illustrate how the work of central theorists and researchers is not divorced from our own actual, everyday practices. It is really important, to me, that we recognize how influential popular theories can become...shaping our everyday lives. With this awareness, we can begin to realize that theories are like languages. To live within the parameters of one theory is like experiencing your world in French....it is different when you experience your work in German. And, there are specific consequences (albeit unintended) to limiting ourselves to one theory/language.

We will begin by discussing some general ways of thinking about how we know what we know about human communication. While simplistic in form, we will draw upon well accepted and discussed categories that help us distinguish between philosophically and pragmatically very different ways of *being in the world* (and thus, of talking, acting, thinking and analyzing social

life): (1) individualism (which is associated with realism, universalism, modernism, romanticism, positivism, cognitivism, essentialism, and objectivity) and (2) relational sensibilities (which are associated with local realities, situated activities, postmodernism - but only some forms - multiplicity of perspectives, cultural and historical trajectories, and the participatory/collaborative achievement of ways of being and knowing).

The first of these categories, individualism, is so well-integrated into contemporary Western life that most of us never question how we know what we know; how we can be *certain* that we have the truth, and so forth. Our work in this class will be to place individualism in question, not because it is wrong or inaccurate but because it is only one way of talking (one language, if you will) about social life and this way, like any other, has particular consequences. In short, individualism asserts a view of persons as possessing some inherent qualities that allow us to be the way we are and thus to know the world the way we know it. Individualism also posits that persons are rational beings who, if utilizing the proper method or mode of understanding, can competently negotiate in and know about the world. This approach to the study of social life also generates particular forms of communication which we will examine briefly as a backdrop for the remainder of the course.

The majority of this course, however, will be devoted to the study of discourse – what people do together in conversation. This orientation moves us from a focus on self contained individuals interacting to a focus on relational ways of knowing that are situated, cultural, and historical. We will spend the majority of the course discussing a specific elaboration of this orientation known as social construction.

Social construction focuses on discourse. Rather than believe that the quality of the accounts a person gives reflects an accurate or inaccurate description of his or her mental state or inner being, social construction attends to: (1) how the account is constructed; (2) how the account functions; and (3) what consequences arise from different discursive coordinations. Thus, social construction is a radically non-cognitive approach where emphasis is placed on what people do together rather than on what they think or feel (however, feelings and thoughts are not ignored, they are simply reconstrued as byproducts of our emersion in relationally constructed realities). The emphasis is relational for one can not accomplish any social action nor put forward any description without the coordinated efforts of others. Therefore, our attention must be drawn toward *processes of interaction rather than toward outcomes, goals, or individual motivation/intention*. Again, as with feelings and thoughts, our treatment of notions such as outcomes, goals or individual motivation/intention can now be considered as discursive options we use for making sense of our daily lives, not as essential and foundational aspects of humanity.

We will address many questions over the course of the semester including:

- How do we create meaning?
- Where does meaning emerge?
- How do we know what we know?
- What *is* knowledge?

- What is the relationship between meaning and action?
- What is involved in the process of observing?
- Can we be objective?
- How do we generate different ways of talking/acting?
- How can we construct alternatives for action when change is needed?
- How do we decide what is ethical and/or what is of value in human interchange?
- What does it mean to be an “expert” or “professional” if we construct identity and knowledge in dialogue with others?
- What happens to our premises of the world when we replace perspectives that privilege individuals with relational perspectives?

Addressing these larger issues will provide for us the basis upon which we may examine several issues that have traditionally been viewed as important in the study of interpersonal communication:

- How do we understand issues of identity? Who am I and how am I like this?
- How do we develop a relational understanding of everyday interactions?
- How do we understand change and/or lack of change in relationships from a relational orientation?
- How can we understand conflict from a social constructionist orientation and how might we move beyond conflict?
- What constraints and potentials does a particular focus on meaning (i.e., meaning as individual and private vs. meaning as social) offer us in our day to day life?

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- to generate conversation about the many ways of talking about (and thus knowing about) social life;
- to appreciate the difference generated by examining the social and relational processes by which we construct our worlds rather than emphasizing only the products of our interactions;
- to understand the philosophical distinctions between individualist and relational orientations to social interaction and their significance to our study of human communication;
- to understand how different assumptions direct us to different views of how to be human;
- to recognize how questions asked from individualist and relational orientations are different and to be able to articulate pivotal questions asked from each position;
- to examine the relationship between theory, research, and everyday interaction; and
- to apply a variety of perspectives to the analysis of human communication in order to illustrate the many ways of "knowing."

REQUIRED TEXTS

Books are available at Durham Book Exchange:

Gergen, K.J. (1999). *An invitation to social construction*. London: Sage Publications

Gergen, M. And Gergen, K.J. (2003). *Social construction: A reader*. London: Sage Publications.

STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

This is a seminar. As such, our learning will take place via dialogue and discussion. Our classes will be focused on discussion of the readings assigned for each week. Your initial comments, reflections, and questions (see “requirements” below) will orient our session. I will assess what material needs to be “filled in” on the basis of listening to (and participating in) our conversations with each other. The discussion of the reading material in this manner will be the main focus of class on Tuesday of each week. Thursday’s class will focus on putting the conceptual material presented in the readings into practice. The main goal of each weekly meeting is to demystify the material, make you familiar and comfortable with it, and develop your abilities to both talk about the philosophical and pragmatic ideas and implications intelligently as well as apply these ideas to your own life, social interaction in general, and in inquiry about the social world.

Everyone is expected to be an active participant in this course. It is not the sort of course where you will be academically successful if you simply take notes and hope to give information back on tests. This course requires thoughtful discussion of the ideas as well as challenging attempts to put the course material into practice.

TUESDAYS: To help engage yourself with the material we will be reading and discussing, each one of you is required to bring *at least one thoughtful reflection the has arisen for you from the reading material to each Tuesday class (see requirements below)*. These reflections might include commentary on how you have engaged with the material, what it provokes you to ponder, what questions it raises for you, and so forth. **These should be typed with your name appearing on the top of the page. I will collect these at the beginning of class** and randomly select questions/comments to begin our discussion. My attempt here is not to intimidate you but is to invite you to *start* our conversations where you are....do you feel stuck, lost, curious, provoked, angry, etc? I hope that after the first couple of weeks of the semester you abandon your inhibitions and feel free to write what you think about the readings....what other ideas they inspired.....and feel no burden to be “brilliant”.....The only “burden” you should feel is to make *connections* with all of us in this class....to help in the building of our class relationship. It is only in this relationship that “knowledge” or “learning” can emerge.

THURSDAYS: I will divide the class into small groups (2-4) and assign each group one Thursday out of the semester. On that day, you and your group members are expected to bring

something to class (an idea, a question, a film clip, a simulation, a game, be imaginative) that provokes *important* discussion about the reading material for the week. This is your chance to make the sometimes difficult readings resonate. How does this stuff connect to your lives? Can you challenge yourself and the rest of the class to put these abstract ideas to practical use. What is the point of all that we are reading? *What difference does it make in your life?* You might present a current dilemma from your own life as a way of "putting the ideas to the test." You might engage the class in some form of activity such as a role play, simulation, an interview, or ask them to write something or complete a questionnaire in order to generate active discussion. You could select certain passages from the reading to closely examine and discuss as they relate to a specific daily event or situation (but please don't bore yourselves....we expect lively classes). There are many possibilities. The main point, however, is to find a way to bring the theoretical and conceptual material we are dealing with to the issues of our own daily lives. You should ask yourself how you can help to make the course material relevant to your own and others' personal relationships, to issues of social concern such as education, health care, organizational life, sexual harassment, oppression, violence, crime, the Middle East, terrorism, etc. These discussions have two goals: (1) to clarify course material and (2) to make course material relevant to our worlds. Your focus in this requirement should be on clarifying your comprehension of the reading material. You and your group partners will be expected to facilitate the entire class discussion on Thursdays.

Again, I want to reiterate that this class will require attentive and serious conversation from you. I will expect you to not only engage with the ideas intellectually but also pragmatically. This means that I will expect you to question assumptions, compare and contrast points of view, and pragmatically talk through the implications of these ideas for you in your life, as well as in local, national, or global politics, or any aspect of practical, everyday life.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

CLASS PARTICIPATION (25%): Your participation grade will be determined by two factors: (1) your contributions to daily class discussion (which will be facilitated by your thoughtful reflections on the readings prepared for Tuesdays and your thoughtful discussion facilitation on your assigned day) and (2) your leadership and intellectual role in class each week. Each class, you will see, requires your active participation (and with only 20 students in this class, active participation should be comfortable for everyone).

REFLECTION PAPER (25%): On Thursday (9/2) you will be assigned the date for your reflection paper. Each of you will write one reflection paper during the semester. Please note that some of you will be writing early on in the semester and others at the very end. Think about your own schedules and these limitations before you sign up for your due date. These papers will give you a chance to carefully think through your own understanding of and relationship to the course material. In your reflection papers, I ask that you carefully consider the material we are discussing and write about your considerations *thoughtfully and intelligently*. In order to do this, you will also find it necessary to provide an overview of the material which you are discussing. These papers are NOT summaries or book reports. I can not stress enough the

importance of FIRST, introducing your reader to the entire topic of social construction and relational realities.

While the specific details of your reflection paper will be tied to a particular set of readings, each paper will address the following basic questions (but in relation to your specific readings): ***What is social construction? What does it mean to adopt a relational orientation to the world? Is a constructionist discourse useful in our world, in our lives (in my life)? Why should we bother learning and talking about this? What could be the benefit of doing so? How might the world (or a particular situation) be different if the relational orientation of social construction were taken seriously.*** Please note, as mentioned above, you can not address these questions without **first** introducing and fully discussing what is meant by social construction, what is meant by a relational orientation, what these terms differ from (e.g., individualism), how they alter our typical ways of being, etc. You need to do the thinking and the work . . . do not assume that your job is only to get the right answer. Often it is useful to provide examples, illustrations, or a specific case or situation to work through and help you make your point.

BOOK REVIEW (10%): You will select a book from a list I will provide. Each book focuses on putting social construction into practice within a particular context or topic area. Topics include:

- Identity/Selfhood
- Organizations and Communities (or organizational/community change)
- Education
- Psychotherapy
- Healthcare/Medicine
- Mediation/Facilitation/Negotiation

Each of you will read a different book and your task is to present the book to the class *such that by the end of your presentation they feel like they actually read the book.* To help you “present” your book to the class, a small group of other students will serve as “interviewers,” asking you questions they have developed about your book based on (1) the topic of the book and their own curiosity about that topic, (2) a summary statement you provide them with prior to your presentation that gives a very brief overview, and (3) their knowledge and curiosity about social construction. So, your book presentation will take the form of a “talk show” where a group of your peers interview you, the expert, on your particular book. If you want to have some “fun” with this requirement, you are free to be innovative...for example, you might ask those interviewing you to treat you as if you were the author of the book and “improvise” your answers to their “personal” questions.... You should note that you will not be required to read the entire book but certainly my hope is that after reading the required pages, you will not be able to stop and will find yourself completing the entire book.

PROJECT DESIGN PAPER (20%): Using the book you have read and presented to the class, you will design a project relevant to your own life that has been inspired by the book you read and presented. The purpose of this proposed project is to illustrate *practically* how you can

imagine social construction making a difference in the domain you have chosen to focus on (education, psychotherapy, health, etc...)

FINAL EXAM (20%): The final exam will be comprehensive, interesting, and an opportunity to show yourself what you've learned! We will discuss together the format of the final as it approaches.

CLASS POLICIES AND RULES

I find that it is useful for you to know, right from the beginning, what my expectations are for each of you concerning a number of issues:

Email: Please feel free to email me. I am happy to discuss course material via email with you if a question emerges. Use Blackboard if you would like to invite the entire class in on a discussion. In addition, you may feel free to email me questions about assignments, papers, readings, etc. You may also email me to arrange a meeting outside of class. However, **do not email your papers to me.**

Voicemail: Leaving me voicemail messages is also fine, although you must realize that I might not be able to get back to you immediately given my schedule of committees, lectures, and other university commitments. I will, however, return any phone calls as soon as I can.

Class Absences: Sometimes each of us become ill or has some other pressing, personal situation that prevents us from attending class. I want you to know right away that I expect each and every one of you to be at each class. Doctor's appointments during class time are unacceptable. You have a commitment to your classes and thus it is your responsibility to schedule doctor's appointments during the "free" times in your day/week. (For this semester, 2:10-3:30 on Tuesdays and Thursdays is not free time.) The same is the case for interviews, special study sessions, and so forth. I want you to fully understand that attendance in class is not an option. It is a requirement, as is your full participation. Yet, there might be a time when you really must miss class. When you must miss class, I expect you to talk with me *before* the class that will be missed. In cases where this is not possible, I will expect extraordinary circumstances to prevail and for you to be able to document these circumstances. Your final grade in this course will reflect your presence in class.

Grading: If you are unhappy with a grade you receive for any written work in this class you may rewrite. However, there are some rules you must follow:

1. ALL REWRITTEN WORK MUST BE HANDED IN EXACTLY ONE WEEK FROM THE DATE THE ORIGINAL WAS RETURNED TO YOU.
2. If you are still unhappy with your grade on the re-written work, you may try again (following the above guideline).
3. Grades are final when you stop working on a particular assignment (as long as you have followed the above guideline).

4. If I feel you are abusing this process, I will not allow further re-writes (See #5).
5. If I feel that your original paper has not been written with serious scholarly effort, you might not be allowed to re-write. (In other words, if I feel that you have not put a focused effort into writing your paper because you assume you will simply re-write it, you will find yourself in a situation you hadn't anticipated - i.e., you will not be given the liberty to re-write.)

One more note on grading. Please keep in mind that the University has identified the following standards:

- A = excellent performance and learning
- B = superior performance and learning
- C = competent, acceptable performance and learning
- D = marginal performance and learning
- F = failure

I will follow these guidelines. I want you to be aware of this from the beginning of the semester. A "C" on a paper does not mean you have performed poorly. Rather, a "C" means you have demonstrated competence in dealing with course material. In order to receive a grade of B or A you must demonstrate more than competence with the course material.

Academic honesty: The University has very clear guidelines concerning academic honest. These guidelines address issues of plagiarism, out-of-class work, exams, misrepresentation of work, and other pertinent issues. Please make yourselves familiar with these policies. No exceptions will be made for breaches of the University's Academic Honest policy.

Disabilities: If you are a student with a documented disability who will require accommodations in this course, please register with the Access Office in the Memorial Union Building, Room 118 (862.2607) for assistance in developing a plan to address your academic needs. Students who are already registered with the Access Office and wish to receive accommodations in this course are strongly encouraged to share their Accommodation Letter with me in a timely manner.

SCHEDULE

Note: *All assigned readings must be completed before class of the week they are assigned.*

WEEK OF TOPIC/READING

8/30 ***INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONAL REALITIES***

9/1 ***THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE REAL AND THE GOOD***

Read for 9/1:

Reader* pp. 2-6, *and* Part I: The Social Construction of the Real and the Good (Chapters 1-7, pp. 7-32)

Invitation* Prologue (pp. vi-vii) and pp. 1-6

9/6

Read for 9/6:

Invitation Chapter 1, Traditions in Trouble (pp. 1-32)

Chapter 2, The Communal Construction of the Real and the Good
(Pp. 33-61)

9/13

IDENTITY AND PERSONHOOD

Read for 9/13:

Reader Part II: Constructing the Person: Culture and Critique (Chapters 8- 11, pp. 33-58)

9/20

Read for 9/20:

Invitation Chapter 3, Discourse and Emancipation (pp. 62-89)

9/27

INQUIRY AND RESEARCH

Read for 9/27:

Invitation Chapter 4, Horizons of Human Inquiry (pp. 90-114)

10/4

Read for 10/4:

Reader Part III: Horizons of Inquiry (Chapters 12-17, pp. 59-118)

10/11

Follow Monday class schedule

10/13

Continue *Horizons of Inquiry*

10/18

DIALOGUE AND THE RELATIONAL Self

Read for 10/18:

Invitation Chapter 5, Toward Relational Selves (pp. 115-141)

10/25

Read for 10/25:

Reader Part IV: The Relational Reconstruction of Self (Chapters 18-23, pp. 119-156)

11/1

ALTERNATIVE AND INNOVATIVE FORMS OF PRACTICE

Read for 11/1:

Invitation Chapter 6, Dialogic Potentials (pp. 142-166)

11/8

Read for 11/8:

Invitation Chapter 7, A Profusion of Practices (pp. 167-193)

11/15

Read for 11/15:

Reader Part V: Profusions of Practice (Chapters 24-27, pp. 157-192)

11/22

BEYOND WORDS

Read for 11/22:

Invitation Chapter 8, Postmodern Culture: Adventures in Analysis (pp. 194-219)

THANKSGIVING BREAK, Thursday, 24 November

11/29

Read for 11/29:

Reader Part VI: Reading Culture (Chapters 28-31, pp. 193-226)

12/6

QUESTIONING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Read for 12/6:

Invitation Chapter 9, Constructionism in Question (pp. 220-241)

Reader Part VII: Constructionism in Question (Chapters 32-34, pp. 227-254)

* Reader refers to *Social Construction: A Reader*
Invitation refers to *An Invitation to Social Construction*

Selfhood/Identity

Gergen, K.J. (1991). *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. New York: Basic Books.

Cushman, P. (1995). *Constructing the self, constructing America*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison Wesley.

Burkitt, I. (1992). *Social Selves*. London: Sage Publications.

McAdams, D.P. (1997). *The Stories we Live By*. NY: Guilford Press.

Organizational/Community Change

Weick, K. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Surowiecki, J. (2004). *The Wisdom of Crowds*. NY: Doubleday.

Raelin, J. (2003). *Creating Leaderful Organizations*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Gladwell, M. (2005). *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.

Cohen, D. and Prusak, L. (2001). *In Good Company*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Education

Schon, D. (1990). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Rogoff, B., Turkkanis, C.G., and Bartlett, L. (2002). *Learning Together*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bruffee, K. (1999). *Collaborative Learning*. Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Langer, E. (1998). *The Power of Mindful Learning*. Perseus Press.

Holzman, L. (1997). *Schools for Growth*. NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Press.

Therapy

Duncan, B., Miller, S., and Sparks, J. (2004). *The Heroic Client*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Anderson, H. (1997). *Conversation, Language, and Possibilities*. New York: Basic Books.

Kutchins, H. and Kirk, S. (2003). *Making us Crazy*. NY: Free Press.

Healthcare/Medicine

Frank, A. (1997). *The Wounded Storyteller*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kleinman, A. (1989). *The Illness Narratives*. NY: Basic Books.

Griffith, J. and Griffith, M. (1994). *The Body Speaks*. New York: Basic Books.