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Reclaiming Indeterminacy and the Deliberative Process

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Abstract: Most traditional theories and conceptions of communication, and consequently community deliberation, like the liberal democracy model with which they are associated, assume a relatively determinant or determinable world as a starting point for interaction. Personal identities, interests, information and values are treated as discoverable and sharable rather than as inherently constructed, fluid and contestable. Many contemporary theories have shown that individuals, events and community are boundariless, complex, internally conflictual. Rather than this being a problem, these same theories argue that a rediscovery or return to indeterminacy is key to developing a more satisfying mutual redetermination. Such theories have remained relatively philosophical and few applications to community deliberation are present. This paper will explore the prospects for an open decentering discourse following these models.

Communities throughout the world have to respond to fundamental social, economic, and political issues as globalization and new conditions and orders develop. Old political boundaries are weakening and most people are more consumers than citizens in any traditional sense. Unfortunately, the public decisions that influence everyday lives appear increasingly beyond reach and outside the realm of democratic processes whether they be on an international, national or local level. People everywhere are becoming increasingly frustrated in their attempts to deal with them. The resultant political apathy, cynicism, and negativism serve as understandable if dangerous dominant attitudes of our times. Unfortunately, we keep reapplying failed solutions louder and more tenaciously in each iteration. The valorization of the expression of opinion over careful

reasoning and deliberation is a symptom and completion of the cycle of powerlessness. The “information revolution” totally misses the contemporary problems of democracy.

Communication teachers and scholars should be especially concerned with the degradation of talk as a route to decisions. With the failure of good talk and good political processes, contemporary society evidences the gradual replacement of discussion with calculation whether it be with voting rather than deliberation, market economy rather than public sphere, or opinion polls rather than the pursuit of joint commitment. A low regard for discussion is professionally costly as well as destructive to the invention of mutually satisfying decisions.

My own work has focused primarily on employee participation in workplace decisions, examining principally how specific micro communicative/political practices have undermined self-determination. My own experience with public participation have been limited to working with health planning in the 70's, my private political and community work, and work done by my students. But since the private sector experience is increasingly influencing the public sector through ideology and corporate volunteers and sponsorship, here I wish to explore ways similar processes in employee participation may be at work in public participation. I wish to suggest that like in the corporate site, paternalistic decision making in communities is giving way to partnering and genuine stakeholder involvement in decisions. But like in the corporate site, this has often lead to more meetings (sometimes, endless meetings), more expression and discussion, and sometimes more decisional commitment but less often to transformations and innovative decisions. Richer conceptions of communication, negotiation, and rationality are necessary.

In both sites greater stakeholder participation, will not necessarily lead to useful value exploration and new solutions to community problems. Many new programs have increased the number of *forums* in which representation, debate, and information sharing can occur, but have not increased *voice*. The concept of “voice” itself is often reduced to simply expression opportunities. Further, attention to stakeholders are often strategic attempts to increase loyalty and commitment or decrease resistance rather than seeking genuine decisional input. And, further yet, group misrepresentation of interests often results from constrained decisional contexts, inadequate or distorted information, socialization and colonization activities, and the solicitation of “consent”

where stakeholders "choose" to suppress or misrecognize their own needs and internal value conflicts. To overcome these problems, I will explore new conceptions of interaction that are likely to improve collaborative decision making.

In this written essay, I will initially stay at a fairly philosophical level. I do not pretend to think that this also can have much practical consequence. But practical theory requires the development of generative concepts that direct our attention to the world in ways that challenge dominant ways of seeing. The words we use in community development are fundamentally ambiguous, they arise from many different traditions and are utilized in rather loose ways in everyday life. My intent is not to claim a correct or more precise meaning, but to pull out of the contest for meaning a fresh look at communication difficulties. To make conceptions more radical requires some returning to root assumptions. First, I wish to argue that the implied communication model making possible our liberal democratic heritage is misleading, that is, it leads to attend to the world in less than currently useful ways. And, second, to sketch a model of practical dialogic interaction that may lead us further, arguing that it is in the micro practices of returning to indeterminacy that development and community happen.

Communication and Liberal Democracy

I am not interested here in doing a full-scale critique of liberal democracy and the practical and conceptual difficulties of working from it in contemporary society (see for example, Barber, 1984; Deetz, 1992). I rather want to examine the native communication theory on which it is based and the way it directs our attention away from core problems. The intent is to show a conception of communication that focuses on postmodern dialogic interactions and creative negotiations rather than liberal democratic conception of freedom, advocacy, rational negotiation, and "open" information exchanges.

If the stakeholder conceptions in public participation are linked to liberal democratic conceptions of an autonomous individual engaging in self interest advocacy, parenting and managerial control systems will continue in more subtle forms, a gridlock of special interest politics is likely even where they do not, and creativity is unlikely. Democracy becomes linked to endless meetings and voting rather than productive discussions and creative decision making.

Overcoming subtle control process and fostering productive mutual decisions requires changing the way we think about human communication. A dialogic view of communication offers possibilities not present in the expressionist/information/adversarial views that dominates contemporary society. Influence centered, informational views of communication (which focused on meaning transmission as if meanings were value neutral) lead us to overlook processes in the formation of social meanings that can be merely reproductive rather than genuinely transformational. Many of the views of dialogue floating about support listening carefully to the other and aid understanding and the finding a arenas of commonality, but accept the meaning that is in people as an end rather than aid the construction processes and the various values embedded in it.

As I have developed at length elsewhere the differences between using liberal democratic and dialogic models are greatest in consequence in times and places of social heterogeneity and rapid change (see Deetz, 1995, chapter 5). These are sites where productive, rather than reproductive, possibilities in communication are clearest. A stakeholder approach both reclaims and advances heterogeneity, but only particular communicative practices makes heterogeneity productive. In doing so it advances the potential in communication descriptions and explanations that are hidden by economic, sociological and psychological accounts (see Deetz, 1994).

The communication view underlying liberal democracy rests in three beliefs. First, the origin of meaning is in the autonomous, rational individual. Second, with adequate public forums, freedom of speech will guarantee the availability of all relevant positions. And third, the preferred mode of communication is based in expression of opinion and advocacy of positions. In the tradition, a communication system could be faulted in each of these areas: The individual is constrained in the autonomous or rational development of meaning; insufficient forums are available or information is not properly distributed; members might not be equal in their ability to present a position or persuade. And of course for each, communication scholars had solutions for each. Clearly aspects of the models were sometimes criticized. For example, for the past several years many have suggested a model of dialogue or collaboration in place of the expressionist

adversarial model. But even here most have retained the former two humanist assumptions. Allow me to discuss the limitations of each of these conceptions.

Consent and the Autonomous Individual

The possibility of a new way of thinking about communication requires a new way of thinking about human experience and sociality. I have reviewed these ideas and others' contributions more completely in other places, so allow me to be brief here (see, Deetz, 1990, 1992, 1994). The communication theory providing liberal democracy was based in an 18th century theory which held that experience was first private and brought to expression and that one was first alone and became social second. The psychological person in direct relation to the world was primary. If only tradition, ideology and all forms of social constraint could be removed the individual was an autonomous meaning maker. Communication was place as after experience as a means of expressing it. All rights and protections accrued first and foremost to the individual other were derived from that. And, conception of good communication, argumentation, free speech, and social contracts complete the picture..

Our new conceptions suggest that experience is a social product and that we are social before private. Therefore concern with social positionality, the politics of the personal, and the social/cultural grounds for experience present a wide array of concerns which show the inherent weaknesses in liberal democracy and why our current popular conceptions cannot deal with the fundamental negotiations required in our contemporary context.

Few psychologists or communication theorists today believe the 18th century view but it is nonetheless deeply embedded in conceptions of communication and in democratic practices. The feminists were the first raise the problems of this conception to political level. Our attention is substantially refocused if a person is social first and only secondly a private person. If the personal itself is political—private thoughts and feelings were historical social creations—than the processes of communication we study are too late. Concerns with freedom or speech and various forms of censorship lead us to overlook the contrive nature of meaning formation and the constraints on the open formation of experience. In most case we have consent to historical meanings rather than examination and open social construction processes. Without

communication processes that open this consent to reconsideration public participation is historically reproductive rather than vital and transformative. Conceptions, linguistic distinctions, and values of all derived from dominant groups' ways of handling situations and problems of the past constrain the possibility of all groups deciding anew on the problems of the present. "Voice" becomes merely an opportunity to speak rather than an engagement in the meaning formation process.

A dialogic communication conception shifts our attention from choices within politically defined contexts with fixed decisional alternatives to concern with the constitution of political contexts and the alternatives. Concern with effective use of language changes to questions of whose language it is, its social/historical partialities, and means of reclaiming alternative voices. As we have already learned in the workplace, speaking *forums* without speaking *voice* offer little to aid participation.

But the current problem is not only the lack of sufficient opportunity for stakeholder representation. Often the interaction itself is systematically distorted. The stakeholder can speak but, owing to contrived and flawed understandings, the representation is skewed. There are several ways this happens. In general a prior social construction (a predetermination or prejudice) stands in the place of the indeterminant character and open negotiative possibilities of actual people and events in actual situations. Such constructions contain embedded values that are not disclosed. Since the construction is treated as the reality it is not open to discussion nor are alternative value premises and means of construction/reconstruction considered. Many standard forms of discursive closure become common (see Deetz, 1992, chapter 7). Generally socially dominant values and perspectives become implicitly universalized and neutralized rather than understood and contestable. Even opposition is defined along the conception lines provide in the dominant views. Hence conflicts, other than socially approved ones, are suppressed and decisions are routinized rather than actively discussed with the possibility of mutuality and creativity. Most of my attention has been directed to how this happens to employees, especially in professional (knowledge-intensive) workplaces, but a similar analysis would follow for other stakeholders (see Deetz, 1998).

The globalization and the awareness of genuine diversity (even if weakly socially formed) has helped situate an awareness of the inadequacy of previously assumed foundations and an understanding of the constructed and negotiated (though heretofore invisible) character of personal identity, social order, knowledge, and social visions of the future. Conceptions of human interaction based on the presumed presence of psychological, sociological, economic, and objective facts failed to account for crucial negotiative accomplishments and must be complemented by a communication conception of social interaction. In this antifoundational move the process of communication is seen as the way temporary structures and orders are produced and overcome in interaction. This rethinking has moved us from an understanding of the constitution of experience, to an understanding of the social-linguistic structuring of experience, to an understanding of the politics of representation and experience, to an affirmation of the dialogic quality of existence.

Inventing Forums for Discussion

Public forums are also limited, limited in number, limited in means of getting stakeholder representation, limited in what is open to discussion and limited in how talk happens. Advancement of public participation requires that each of these be addressed. Our experience from companies is that the opportunities for employee participation in decision making are much greater today. The customer focus of many companies provide contexts for direct consumer representation in ways that have been missing for some time. Many companies have partnering arrangements with suppliers and large customers. The growth of communication and information technologies allow for more frequent, sustained, and interactive contact among groups. Similar forced influence expanded community involvement.

But in the workplace, each of these have been limited in important ways. For example, employee involvement plans have often been developed more to increase compliance, commitment, and loyalty than to broaden value debate and increase innovation. Most often the involvement is limited to application decisions and do not include representation in company wide planning and social goal formation. Research on teams and participation programs have consistently demonstrated process of ideological, disciplinary, unobtrusive, or concertive control

and high degrees of employee consent to arrangements that are not to member's own or company benefit (see Knights & Willmott, 1989; Bullis & Tompkins, 1989; Bullis, 1991; Barley & Kunda, 1992; Barker, 1993; Barker & Cheney, 1994). Similarly, customer focus groups often function more to solicit information on tastes and pricing to aid sales rather than to determine what consumers really want. And rarely are social values solicited at all except again as they might affect sales. The new technologies are being developed in most cases to extend the corporate influence outward rather than to provide the public with better information upon which to make their decisions or to enable the public to participate in corporate decision-making. In short, in the workplace most representation forums are used by dominant groups to suppress or diffuse conflict arising from other stakeholder groups rather than foster genuine conflict and debate for the sake of better decision. I suspect that the same can be said for much of the public participation in the community.

Adversarial Versus Collaborative Communication

I will say less here about the assumed process of communication embedded in liberal democracy because members of many disciplines including communication have done much to suggest alternatives to the informational and adversarial model of interaction. This has been important. While we remain the most litigious society in history, from the divorce courts to corporate America to the community and family, we have begun to teach and practice alternative ways of decision making. Clearly still, the transformation is incomplete. Both authority based commands and self-interest centered debates seem still more common. Open dialogue and meetings may be more common, but still much of this seems directed to expression and discussions rather than deciding together.

And, even where transformation has occurred, the limitation of forums and understanding of the politics of experience constrain collaborative discussion and achievement. We may have learned to try to mutually accomplish interests rather than engage in positional bargaining, but we have not carefully explored the origin of interests. We may have learned to listen and appreciate those who look different from ourselves, but we rarely let them challenge our way of being.

What Might We Do In the Future

The difficulties of articulating a radical new communication theory is probably as great as early revolutionary writers found in expressing concepts of liberal expressionist democracy in regard to the state, and with as much opposition from the business, state, and even common sense, but also as important. A carefully developed contemporary communication theory may well be as important to the next century as the conception of free speech and representation based in natural rights of the autonomous individual has been to the past two.

Many authors are making attempts through applications of conceptions of "recovery of otherness," "third-culture building," "ideal speech situations," and "genuine conversations." Unlike liberal democracy's speaking from and about that which seems secure and fixed—the person, the social order, information, and shared values—each of these focus on communication as world making through deconstructing the determined world, thus recovering its indeterminacy, and enabling mutual redetermination. The theoretical diversity of such positions is useful and points to the possibility of important theoretical debate within this new communication perspective. If communication teachers and scholars are to contribute to the negotiative potential in our contemporary situation a number of changes are essentials that impact on public participation. Here are some suggestions of what communication teachers/scholars/professional can do to aid public participation.

Communication Should be Seen as Explanatory

The difficulty with traditional social science modes of explanation is that they have taken the objects produced by thinking and talking about the world in the terms of psychology, sociology, economics or history (i.e., affective or cognitive structures, social structure, market economy, and grand narratives) and have given these abstractions explanatory power. A communication analysis describes the processes by which these explanations came to be constructed and reproduced, and processes by which such constructions and their deployment impact on the politics of decision making. Thought communicationally, personalities and social structures do not exist somewhere controlling or directing human behavior. Personalities and social structures are abstractions from a produced set of patterned interactions and have no force except as enacted and reproduced in ongoing interactions. Doing this help us focus on the practices of public participation as they

create the world of people.

We Need to Focus More on Mutual Decision Making and Less on Expression

One of the problems of our liberal democracy legacy is that the autonomous individual is seen as the origin of perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. The autonomous individual either by his or her self or in concert with other like creatures is seen as the site of decision making. The possession and distribution of information was seen as a critical determinant of the quality of the decisions reached. With such fundamental conceptions in place, it is no wonder that communication professionals focused on expression skills and so much of the discussion of decision making has focused on information, information needs, information distribution, and information technologies. Mass media theory found its conceptual space in the way liberal democracy related to communication in its information function. Democracy itself often becomes reduced to the freedom of expression and "free" markets rather than a form of deliberation and decision making where people can collectively make decisions for the good of all.

Advocates of the freedom of speech have not adequately considered the extent of the inequality of access to speaking forums and the difference in "megaphone" size. Freedom of expression is essential because good decision making requires that all relevant perspectives should be known by all. Unfortunately contemporary communication environments do not assure all perspectives are known. Freedom of expression is meaningless if there is no one to represent relevant positions or if the one with the biggest megaphone can drown out the chorus of free voices. But the problem is even deeper. Present interaction processes do not foster the development of all relevant positions. Freedom of expression neither specifies the right of being heard nor guarantees the expression of all positions. The desire for representation requires the building of processes that develop alternative perspectives, fosters their expression, and gives them an equal opportunity to influence decisions. The restrictions control systems place on representation may be direct through freedom limitation or coercion, but are often unobtrusive and subtle through unwarranted consent.

Further, the faith in self-interest expression as a means to good collective decisions relies on an invisible hand to reach socially rational choices. Such a faith fails to consider that individually

all many seem to benefit from decisions that have negative systemic consequences to everyone in the long term. Without reforming this view, conceptions of negotiation remain limited, important forms of domination remain undetected, and democracy is weak. In the US the preferred political forum is the debate. The one who can advocate and persuade is declared the winner. I wonder whether we would select the same person or think the same about issues if we required the candidates to sit down and solve a problem together. Surely watching two intelligent people figure out ways to meet the different needs and values of society would be instructive to us. The candidate most creative in finding mutually satisfying systemic solutions might well be the better leader. But all this requires a different communication model.

Unfortunately, we, like many in society generally expect instant democrats. Assign group projects and people will learn how to work in groups. Unfortunately students are like faculty in faculty meetings. More meetings, more chances for expression, do not mean better decisions or decision at all. Meeting is to decision making what Xeroxing is to reading. Many of our courses teach Xeroxing rather than reading, most of our courses still teach expression not decision making.

The critical function of communication studies is to promote better decisions. In our too often attention to information and influence we have often forgotten that the primary function of expression is to make sure the community does not overlook a position that is valuable for decisions. Rather than to attend to the enhancement of participation in decision-making, we have treated informing and persuading as ends in themselves. From a participation point of view, the point of rhetoric is to open discussions where none appears to be needed rather than to finish off close them (Deetz, 1983). Rarely do we highlight the critical functions. In media studies we attend to mass media's role in informing but usually remain relatively mute regarding its influence on deliberation.

We Need to Attend to Voice as Well as Forums

As a consequence of our attention to expression in a liberal democracy mode, we have paid too much attention to speaking opportunities and not enough to speaking "voice." Many people today understand the need in a liberal democracy for speaking opportunities. Many debates have been written on the access to mass media and the Internet. And many new programs have

increased the number of *forums* (the times and places) where representation and debate could occur, but they have not increased *voice* (the ability to freely form and express one's own meanings).

With the lack of voice, people can speak but, owing to contrived and flawed understandings, the representation is skewed. There are several ways this happens. In general, as shown by cultural studies scholars, prior social constructions (kinds of images) stand in the place of real people in a real situation. Such constructions contain embedded values that are not disclosed. Since the constructions are treated as the reality, they are not open to negotiation nor are alternative value premises considered. And generally attention is directed away from the embedded values to shared "neutral" ones. Opinions are expressed but not explored.

For example, the Internet advocates treat the medium itself as neutral. And many people are concerned about restrictions on "free" speech on the Internet. One popular commercial loudly proclaims that there is no age, no race, no gender, no income, and so forth on the Internet. But studies have consistently shown that not only is access and usage of the Internet heavily biased toward certain groups, it itself fosters preferred images and expression qualities of young males, for example. Further, particular reasoning processes, forms of evidence, ways of noting authority, and concepts of decision making predominate. The greatest restrictions on the Internet do not come from the lack of access or governmental censorship, but from qualities of the medium itself in the way it effects voice. But implicit forms of censorship and voice restriction rarely get discussed. The attention goes to freedom of expression. Clearly the Internet can aid voice in some cases and restrict it in others. Voice has to be a central concern in our studies.

As Boland (1987) described the concern: "At issue is the nature of language and human communication, and their role in our social construction of the everyday world. The problem that concerns us here is the way our images of information without in-formation lead to an ignorance of language and our human search for meaning which together deny the very possibility of human communication. The process of constructing the social world is a process of language and communication. Our distorted images of information and communication, and their widespread use to understand our everyday world, threaten our ability to construct and reconstruct it in

humanly satisfying ways" (p. 366).

In Sum

Communication scholars and teachers should direct more of their attention to the significant problems of our time. The most significant issues related to communication involve increasing the capacity of people to make choices together. Unfortunately many of our common sense conceptions of communication and democracy hamper our contribution. This common sense is a social historical product and as such provides a relevant stock of taken-for-granted perceptions and understandings. But it also retains conceptions that would no longer stand up to scrutiny and distort our choices in our contemporary situation. Our common sense fails us most in received views of individual autonomy, information and decision making. To the extent that we recognize and respect the heterogeneity of the world community, we recognize that meanings are constructed and potentially openly negotiated products. "Good" communication can either be advanced as a way to open our consideration of others and alternative or as ways to close off discussion and lead to systematically distorted decision. We must choose which cause we wish to advance.

Few conceptions of communication deal with interaction in conditions of fundamental indeterminacy, where each interactant holds conflicting subject positions regarding a world that can be constructed in many different ways and where the outcome hopes only to be a temporary responsive move intending only to open a future with greater options. A growing number of scholars have taken seriously the issues of constructionism, have shown the ways open interaction is foreclosed, and have developed way of thinking interaction under conditions of indeterminacy. I cannot repeat their various analyses here but wish to reiterate that this is the direction I believe that we must go.

Adequate conceptions of communication and practices of negotiation can enable responsible and democratic daily practices and better joint decisions. Communication researchers can do their part by demonstrating and critiquing forms of domination, asymmetry, and distorted communication showing where and how reality and personal experience can become obscured and misrecognized. Of special concern are forms of false consciousness, unexamined compliance, systematically distorted communication, routines, and normalizations

which produce partial interests and keep people from genuinely understanding or acting on their own interests. Such insights help produce "forums" where the conflicts can be reclaimed and "voice" so that they are openly discussed and resolved with fairness and justice.

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