Personal identity and mutual understanding are primary products of interpersonal interaction. Descriptive accounts of interpersonal relationships need to be augmented by consideration of the ethical issues raised by the nature of identity formation and mutual understanding. Ethical ideals developed in the enlightenment tradition fail to account for the ethical concern with social systems and the manners by which personal identity and meaning are formed. This essay presents Gadamer's ontology of understanding as a developmental foundation for interpersonal system ethics. Interaction is conceptualized in terms of the demand that the subject matter places on openly formed mutual understanding and unethical interaction is shown as practices which prohibit this development. Several examples are given of the processes by which understanding is blocked. The essay concludes with descriptions of ways of overcoming these blocks.

KEY CONCEPTS Ethics, communication ethics, mutual understanding, Gadamer, critical theory, democratic communication, free speech, interpersonal systems, ideological discursive practices.

STANLEY DEETZ (Ph.D., Ohio University, 1973) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N J 08903.

Ethical conduct is important in interpersonal interaction. While the interpersonal setting is often our place of greatest trust, it is also our place of greatest vulnerability. Family interactions, friendships, and the frequency of face-to-face conversation with those about us, each in their own way suggest the importance of the quality of interpersonal communication. Yet relatively few scholars have focused on ethical concerns in the interpersonal setting. In the 750-page Handbook of Interpersonal Communication (Knapp & Miller, 1985), the word “ethical” appears twice and “ethics” does not appear at all. “Influence,” “strategy” and “compliance” are used throughout. No discussion of ethics appears in the Handbook of Communication Science (Berger & Chaffee, 1987). Both works are filled with value statements and value judgements, but the nature and foundation of such value claims are rarely raised as social ethical concerns. This omission represents more the particular value orientation of the field (aiming primarily at influence and individual satisfaction) and the research concern with effectiveness than a social lack of concern with ethical relational interaction (Lannamann, 1989). Outside the bulk of empirical studies, a few
authors have developed ethical principles for the conduct as well as the criticism of interpersonal communication (see Johannesen, 1983). Most of these ethics have borrowed heavily from ethics developed for public discourse. In doing so, they have largely tried to establish a priori criteria for judging the types of appeals made in speech acts and the consequence of speech acts (Bormann, 1981; Condon, 1977; Nilsen, 1974). Unfortunately, they have given little guidance to describing the practical conditions in which ethical speech can happen or help in distinguishing ethical from unethical relationships.

A central problem has been in trying to provide ethical principles which are applicable across contexts and situations without becoming dogmatic or ethnocentric (Fisher, 1978). Most attempts at defining an ethics for interpersonal communication have, thus, tried to find a middle ground between dogmatic and absolutist ethics on one hand and total relativism on the other (Bidney, 1959; Nielsen, 1974). This middle ground appears to be established in three compatible but different manners: a personal commitment to reasoned discourse; a democratic, egalitarian commitment to free speech; and a situational or contextual morality arising out of specific communities. While the goal remains essential, several difficulties remain with each of these three directions whether taken separately or together.

Nearly all current ethics for communication are based in western enlightenment tradition (Johannesen, 1983; Maclntyre, 1984). Their self-ascribed strength lies in their openness, their belief in reflective rational discourse, and their commitment to the inherent goodness of the human character. These are summed up well in Nilsen’s (1974) descriptions of important values in a democracy: A belief in the intrinsic worth of the human personality; a belief in reason as an instrument of individual and social development; self-determination as the means to individual fulfillment; man’s fulfillment of his potentialities as a positive good (p. 14). These values function to form an interpersonal ethic in the works of Brown and Keller (1968, 1979) and Keller (1981). They reject any form of persuasion that might curtail another’s freedom or limit the self-determination of another. In applying such an ethic, it is clear that the emphasis is on the values and attitudes of the interactants rather than on any particular form of communication or institutional arrangement. Such values appear to undergird nearly all ethical systems designed to enhance reasoned discourse, personal growth, and democratic communication.

Outside of the interpersonal context, the arguments for basic human rights and free speech carry much of the same person-centered humanistic values. The focus is on the individual and the commitment to choice based in reasoned or reason-giving communication (Fisher, 1978). In order for such ethics to guide communicative choices, however, there must be mutual commitment to these values and attitudes. They fail as a practical guide when they are not reciprocal. This does not so much criticize their value as it shows their limits in particular practical contexts.

It is not my intent in this paper to criticize the ethical statements which have already been developed. Reviews of the existing literature have been considered in detail by Brummett (1981) and Deetz (1983). Unitary themes are found in these various attempts to provide an ethics for interpersonal interaction. The primary thrusts of current works on interpersonal ethics are valuable in terms of the issues that they try to address, but there are important ethical concerns that they do not address because of the direction they have taken. Nearly all the ethics for interpersonal communication developed at this time focus on the individual and decisions made in interaction. These ethics generally provide a statement of the constraints which the
individual should accept as she or he attempts to be effective in interaction. Ethical concerns are seen as limits to message invention, proposing what are ethically inappropriate communicative actions.

In this work I wish to make a significant departure from these extensions of the enlightenment tradition's focus on human rights, rationality, individual autonomy, and democratic decision making as a basis for ethics. Rather than working from a humanist concern with the individual and expression, I wish to investigate the command of the outside—of the subject matter—as a guide to the formation of the individual and expression. Following several modern writers (as varied and at odds in most respects as Baudrillard, 1975; Foucault, 1980; Gadamer, 1975; Hall, 1985; Kristiva, 1984), this work assumes that eighteenth century conceptions of language, experience, communication, and the human individual were seriously flawed. In light of modern communication theories, contemporary conceptions of individual autonomy, democracy, and ethics (if they can be reclaimed at all) must consider the social production of knowledge, experience, and identity rather than attending primarily to their expression. The conditions of the construction of experience through communication are of more concern here than the "free" expression and "reasoned" collective decision. Such a position does not so much deny other ethical concerns but poses an even more fundamental set of issues for them. In questioning the self-evidence and certainty of personal experience the struggle for ethical interaction poses new and critical concerns. As Weedon (1987) suggested: "The meaning of experience is perhaps the most crucial struggle for meaning since it involves personal, psychic, and emotional investment on the part of the individual" (p. 79).

**Ethics as a Positive Force within a Politics of Experience**

At least since the works of Bateson (1972), Watzlawick, Bevin and Jackson (1967), and Pearce and Cronen (1980), interpersonal researchers have understood that individual behaviors take on meaning from their system function rather than from the speaker's intent or external social conventions. In this sense the system produces meaning and individual identities which individuals take on as their own as they participate in the system. Since systems are intrinsically involved in the production of individuals and experience their internal logics have a clear ethical dimension. Two individuals can each do good and reasonable things and yet participate in a pathological and what might be call unethical system (see Pearce, 1989). Evaluation of systems from the standpoint of ethical concern considers whether the communication taking place is ethical when freed from the intents and even mutual desires of the participants. From such a view, it is not the actions, decisions, or even reasons for decisions that can be ethical, but the system of interaction in which they have a place. Such a view does not eliminate personal responsibility but focuses it on the development and maintenance of relational systems rather than individual actions or attitudes. The development of relational systems where responsible action is possible becomes an ethical responsibility beyond the characteristics of ethical actions or attitudes. Largely the emphasis appropriately needs to be placed on the forms of interaction and institutional arrangements.

If most ethical conceptions for communication have considered the ethics of expression within a politics of decision making, this view suggests an ethics of person and experience formation within a politics of experience and representational practice. Do existing systems and their forms of institutionalization allow for the open development of identity and experience or are they based on arbitrary advantage to
certain experiences and representations? Can groups of people effectively engage in socially achieved self-development or do dominant groups or conceptions skew development and limit differentiation within experience and identity? Do systems enhance the contact with the outside world furthering insight and individualization or do they operate self-referentially producing images and self confirming internal relations among those images? Questions such as these arise out of ethical concern and pose the need for communication studies that provide accounts of how actual systems function in these regards.

Lannamann (1989) demonstrated that communication researchers have tended to take an individual-centered orientation and, thus, have overlooked the social-historical place of particular relational forms. For example, institutional practices following norms based on democratic ideals and free marketplace of ideas may not suppress the expression of opinion, since everyone has a say, but such ideals do not guarantee that some practices will not suppress the open formation of opinion in the sense that the type of discussion does not encourage the development of opinions beyond those already possessed by the members. Ethics, in this sense; could be concerned with the communication systems that enhance person and knowledge formation rather than the expression of positions. Such an idea is more a renewal than new. Aristotle (1966, book 1, sect. 14) wrote much about the difference between one who uses the forum to pursue self-interest (the “idiot,” the private, the homeless, “either a beast or god”), and the citizen’s attempt to promote the community good. Barber (1984) presented such an idea as “strong democracy”—that is, a concern with mutual development in the community rather than competition over self interests—as a contrary institutional arrangement. Following this example, Barber (1984) poses ethical issues for individualistic, enlightenment democracy as it “depicts politics as nothing more than the chambermaid of private interests. The history of the twentieth century should have taught us that when democracy cannot respond to the need of the community with anything more than pusillanimous privatism, other, more oppressive political ideologies will step in” (p. 118). From the broadest level of democratic politics to family decisional process and ordinary conversation systems and structures have important ethical implications that cannot be assessed from looking at individual behaviors and attitudes (Craig, 1984).

Ethics which focus on the realization of the individual’s potential fail to see that an individual’s potential is limited by collective human potential which can only be formed in discourse. Democratic models frequently note the desirability of emergent ideas, but limit ethical concern to individual rights of expression of existing ideas. This leads the democratic ideal to conceptualize the social as the mere collection of individuals and to underestimate the significance of possible meaning over meanings presently known by group members. Intimacy models for healthy relationships and ethical communication are limited as ideals for different reasons but out of the same conception—that is, the undue emphasis on the individual over the social. This leads the intimacy ideal to prize the expression of personal knowledge over public knowledge (and, thus, does not account for all the situations in which intimacy is not functional) and overlooks how personal knowledge and feelings are socially formed (Gatlin, 1977; Gergen & Davis, 1985; Parks, 1982). Both concepts most often lead to an unnecessary tension between effectiveness and ethics where effectiveness is the positive force of influence and personal expression and ethics is the negative bridle keeping the individual within socially appropriate bounds, a relationship which looks much like that between speed limits and the attempt to reach a destination. From
such a standpoint, civility and compromise can be seen as social goods but not themselves the initial intent and drive of communication.

By focusing on developing ethical interpersonal systems, ethical practices become an intrinsic positive force of communication with a complementary relation to effectiveness. In order to develop this complementary rather than competitive relation, effectiveness here is defined by the outcome of the interaction freed from concern with the accomplishment of any individual’s intention. As long as the focus is on effectiveness from the individual interactant’s perspective, whether as persuasion or understanding, ethics is seen as a social constraint on the accomplishment of individual goals and the individual may frequently be confronted with the choice of being ethical or effective. In contrast, we might say that it is nice and even good if an individual accomplishes goals through interaction, but this intent is usually a negative constraint on ethical interaction which aims at producing understanding beyond that held by the individual. Ethics in this sense is not a limit on interaction as a “thou shall not” but a drive within a system to understand more since that outside the system has demands of its own which exceeds each understanding of that which is “other.” Ethics denotes the legitimate pull of the outside in its resistance to be reduced to one’s own. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argued the breaking of subjective and social domination—any system of internal self-reference—rests in the excess of the elements of experience over any articulation of those elements.

Once we free the concept of understanding from a reproductive view and persuasive change from domination of opinion—free both ethics and effectiveness from the individual standpoint—the unity of ethics and effectiveness becomes clear. This is a change from seeing the individual as more or less effective to seeing the interaction as more or less productive—that is, in the service of further understanding and agreement on the subject matter being determined by the nature of the subject matter itself. The communication concern with decision making often focuses on the representation of different interests in the decision rather than on the way the arising of a decision can be formative of individual interests. The holding of personal interests and goals as pure and knowable fails to account for the social production of interests. The question here is how can interests be ethically produced rather than how are they appropriately represented. The change is from seeing what the individual’s point of view is and how it is presented to determining whether the interaction enables the development of understanding beyond any present individual point of view. From the ethical standpoint of mutual formation of understanding, the least effective thing a person might do in interaction is convince the others. To the extent that someone prevails, further understanding is always limited by someone’s prior understanding. The development of such a view of ethics requires a reconsideration of the relation of language, experience and mutual understanding.

The Genuine Conversation and the Social Formation of Understanding

Most models of interpersonal communication see communication as the reproduction of meaning (for general reviews, see Axley, 1984; Berger & Chaffee, 1987; Knapp & Miller, 1985). Communication effectiveness is based primarily on reproductive fidelity. Process models may break the linear conception of this reproduction but still set as an ideal the speaker’s ability to lead the listener to a predefined thought or action. Recent works have shown the several liabilities of such conceptions. For example, authors like Habermas (1984, 1987) and Gadamer (1975) have convincingly
argued that the most basic conception of communication is the attempt to reach mutual understanding. This model emphasizes the continual social formation of consensus in interaction beyond the intentions and opinions of the participants. Mutual understanding focuses on reaching openly formed agreement regarding the subject matter under discussion rather than agreement of the perspective of the participants. Idealized descriptions of ethical communication systems have been proposed based on their conception of mutual understanding driven by the subject matter (see Apel, 1979; Deetz, 1983). Understanding the ideal character of ethical systems of interaction allows us to account for the intrinsic properties of interaction that contribute to the continued development of consensual understanding that, at the same time, produce the full variety of interests that can exist in the human community or particular relationship. The model description epitomizes interpersonal interactions that enable the mutual formation of consensus, which promote the mutual understanding of the subject matter and, thus, which expand each participant's possible experience. This ideal model must be methodologically normative in regard to the process of reaching consensus on the subject matter—the effectiveness issue—and ethically normative due to its participation in the constant formation of the person (Apel, 1979; Deetz, 1985).

Gadamer (1975), through his reconsideration of the nature of human understanding, provided an important ontological foundation. The full significance of his position requires a careful development of a hermeneutic description of language, a development which is beyond the scope of this essay and can be found elsewhere (see Deetz, 1978). Central to his theory of language and ethics is his description of the genuine conversation. The genuine conversation is hermeneutically shown to be a special interaction among two persons and the subject matter before them. But while most in communication studies turn to consider what each person has to say about the subject matter, Gadamer focuses on what the subject matter "says" to each. The relationship may be clearer if we look at the experience of a great work of art.

The great work of art's significance rests more in what it demands of us than in what we say about it or judge it to be using criteria. In fact the great work of art demands from us thoughts and feelings and the formation of concepts and evaluative criteria which do not precede its presence; it questions the adequacy of what we think and say. If the person with such an experience wishes to bring it to another, it is not one's own feelings and concepts which are at issue, for they are inevitably less than the work has to offer. The attempt is rather to help the other remove limitations to their own seeing so that the work may more thoroughly draw on them. Ideally, the other will help reveal aspects of the work which enriches one's own experience. The conversation has the character of progressively opening the prejudicial certainty of each individual to question. A truly great work might call one's very way of life into question.

While the subject matter of most conversations does not have the significance and power of the great work of art, a productive rather than reproductive conception of communication shows the fundamental process by which mutual understanding arises in regard to the subject matter. Gadamer (1975) argued that the ideal is not "self expression and the successful assertion of one's point of view, but a transformation into communion, in which we do not remain what we were" (p. 341). While the dialectic of the genuine conversation requires a certain commonality of prior understanding, it works more to create and recreate a common language and experience. More than sharing one's experience or point of view, it is the "art of

Effectiveness and Ethics in Interpersonal Interaction

231
seeing things in the unity of an aspect, i.e. it is the art of the formation of concepts as the working out of common meaning" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 331). It is not the insides of the other or the self that is to be understood for either would be covering up the objective demand of the subject matter with one’s subjective reaction.

In this brief description it becomes clearer why “successful” presentation of one’s own meaning can limit rather than aid productive communication. For to the extent that the object or other is silenced by the success, the capacity to engage in conceptual expansion and reach open consensus on the subject matter is limited. The “otherness” of the other and of the subject matter before us draws one’s concepts to the limit and forces a surrender of them to the development of consensual thought. Levinas (1969) presented the understanding poetically: “The presence of the Other is equivalent to calling into question my joyous possession of the world” (p. 75). The loss and the growth are critical to human social conduct.

As an ontology of understanding, Gadamer is claiming the genuine conversation as the fundamental way all understanding happens. All reproductions rest on this fundamental production (see Deetz, 1978). Conversation is the ongoing process of creating mutual understanding through the open formation of experience. On the basis of Gadamer’s description of the genuine conversation, we can establish a basic guiding principle for interaction; an ethical principle based on the very conditions for communicative understanding. This principle can be expressed as follows: Every communicative act should have as its ethical condition the attempt to keep the conversation—the open development of experience—going (for development, see Apel, 1979; Deetz, 1983; Rorty 1979). That is, the communicative act should be responsive to the subject matter of the conversation and at the same time help establish the conditions for future unrestrained formation of experience.

In suggesting that every act, among other things, carries an ethical force, no absolutist claim is being made for the quality of one material act over another. Rather, attention must be given to the function of the action in operant communication systems. The ethical quality of an act is not determined in advance but tentatively determinable, thus the ethicality of behavior cannot always be known in advance but is accomplishable in ongoing systems. For example, the making of an argument can function to give voice to a position being left out, can reveal aspects of the subject matter being hidden or overlooked, can force an opinion over others, or can lead the group to respond to an image rather than that which the image is of. In the former two cases it has an ethical force and in the later two an unethical one. The systemic function rather than what was wished to be accomplished is the key issue. The ethical “knowledge” proposed is a kind of critical insight or phronesis in Aristotle’s sense of practical wisdom born of experience and cultivated in relation with others (see Apel, 1979, and Gadamer, 1975, for development). This contrasts with a kind of knowledge which can be possessed by an individual or taught as a list of standards.

As such this ethical principle for communication based on Gadamer’s description is not fulfilled by the will, attitude, or choice of the participants. Rather, in its natural state, the will is produced out of the demand of the subject matter in interaction—that while one might have wished it different, it can’t be denied. But, as will be shown, the “conversation” can be blocked or distorted in a variety of fashions. The individual as a choosing agent cannot simply produce the outcome of interaction but can be more or less prepared and can remove barriers and blocks to the open formation of experience. The presence of stoppages maintained in an interaction system is the clearest measure of an unethical communication system. The maintenance of a
blockage provides an arbitrary restraint on the interaction and prohibits the undistorted formation and expression of human interest and the continually changing consensus on the subject matter (Habermas, 1984). A system that precludes “genuine conversation” becomes simultaneously ineffective and unethical. Participants in a relationship are, for reasons of both effectiveness and ethical responsibility, obligated, by the various preconditions existing in a communication community, to enable the realization of genuine conversation (Apel, 1979; Habermas, 1979). This enabling can only be accomplished by the removal of the conditions of blockage. In the remainder of this paper, I wish to discuss the types of blockages and how they may be overcome in further interactions.

Many of the concepts and research in our field look different if considered from an ethics focusing on the open construction of meaning. In fact, the critique of the dominant existing work looks much like the one Gilligan (1982; Gilligan, Ward & Taylor, 1988) provided for psychology when she demonstrated that female moral development centered on care rather than rules (see Makau, 1989). Care in both the Gilligan and Heideggerian (1962) sense is the leading motive of the genuine conversation (Deetz & Stevenson, 1986). Care involves enabling the other to present itself on its own terms and an appreciation of it for what it is. The control and influence drive has led much of the interpersonal research to look at persuasion, compliance, and relational management, but this work has failed to explore how these interests and skills can block open formation through the assertion of opinion over pursuit of understanding the subject matter. Experimental research in communication often structures the research situation so that control is the only appropriate response and the human response of “care” is treated as ineffective communication rather than communication driven by a different motive. One wonders how to separate the prediction and control orientation of the research from the nature of the subject’s objective response.

Conversational Blockage

Research to determine the variety of possible stoppages to genuine conversation has been conducted by many, but most has been done by those outside of the communication discipline and only a few have considered the interpersonal context (see Pateman, 1975; Pêcheux, 1982). A considerable amount of work has been done by the critical theorists who have investigated how the systematic distortion of communication can take place, but they have tended to focus on the public sphere (e.g., Forester, 1985) or on the media (e.g., Hall, 1985; Van Dijk, 1985). Much of this work has investigated the presence and function of ideology (e.g., Mumby, 1987; Thompson, 1984).

The blockages of the genuine conversation function interpersonally in the same way that ideology does socially. The social concept of ideology suggests that in any society or group there may be beliefs and values that are not subject to critical examination. Many of these beliefs and values are maintained precisely because they are not able to be brought to discourse. If they were critically discussed many would be untenable, but such discussion is precluded. Mutual understanding of the subject matter is denied by the presence of these ideological forms. Unethical interpersonal communication systems perpetuate interpersonal ideologies and limit the ability to engage in genuine conversation.

Ideology in this interpersonal sense is present in many ways. Any language has its own ideological foundations. Every language has embedded in it historical beliefs and
values if only in the sense that it carries with it what culture considers noteworthy, memorable, and distinguishable. What changes these types of natural prejudices (which are essential to have a language, a culture, or even a personality) into ideology, is the inability to question these prejudices in the use of language (Gadamer, 1975; Thompson, 1984). At the most general level, if the language contains implicit ideologies giving expression preference to the dominant cultural group, other groups are prohibited from undistorted expression of their experiences and all groups are prohibited from the continuous development of human experience through historical concept formation within the language. This may be quite explicit but more frequently takes an implicit form, e.g., words which implement a gender distinction on top of an occupational one when gender is irrelevant. While a number of authors have raised issues like this to ethical consideration, many such practices are still largely invisible or obscured (Rakow, 1986; Weedon, 1987).

**Freezing the Participants**

Blockage is possible in a more direct and specific sense any time interactants perform the necessary action of labeling or conceptualizing themselves or other people. Textbooks often argue against the use of labels and stereotypes, but while the advice is useful, the basis for the advice often rests on inadequate theories of language and perception. We may take the advice based both on good sense and the authority of the author, but we are not aided in understanding the ethical issues involved nor can the analysis be developed beyond the advice. While the power of his work has often been lost in careless usage, Buber (1970) provided an important ethical foundation compatible with Gadamer in his ontology of “thouness.” In Buber's work “I-it” relationships are not unethical because they objectify the other through conceptualization but can become so in certain interaction processes. When the I-it relationship is held above examination, when the other is held as a common object unable to object outside of its conceptualized character, both the I and the other have been violated. The recognition of “thouness” breaks the stoppage by interrogating or posing questions to any “it” conception. In modern terminology, recognition of thouness is an act of deconstruction. Thouness suggests that any possible label or conception of both self and other is capable of being questioned. The realization of other as a person constantly exceeds every attempt at conceptualization as an object. Buber is not suggesting by thouness that every relationship should move toward intimacy and the disclosure/realization of the other’s real self, but that the “realness” of the other is the resistance to fixation. The problem is not I-it relationships, but the forgetting of thouness. The remembrance of thouness leaves each and every attempt to form a concept of the other potentially available to be questioned. Thouness in this sense is critical to the formation of self and other. “Itness” is a limitation to the free and open formative discourse, whether held as one’s real self or conceptualized by the other.

With a conception of thouness as a functional aspect of interpersonal systems, the analysis can move beyond thouness as an attitude to the analysis of discourse processes. One common occurrence of the freezing of self and other in interactional systems has been well described by Wood and Pearce (1980) as the “ist” argument—calling the other a racist, sexist or Marxist. Wood and Pearce describe the “ist” argument as inherently unethical based principally on its capacity to stop the possibility of further expression. In the “ist” argument, it is not the application of the label itself that is unethical, thus, an unethical appeal, since it may be a legitimate
attempt to label the beliefs and values of the other. However, the placement of the “ist” argument in the ongoing interaction may prohibit the examination of those beliefs and values rather than open them for discussion.

The fixation of self and other can also be investigated in the production of images. Images of self and other are formed in all interactions. Such images are remembered and carried into future interactions as well as used as interpretive principles for past interaction. Due to the formation and retention of images, interpersonal communication may at times become primarily an interaction within or between images. Such an idea is not foreign to those working with interpersonal communication from a variety of different perspectives. The formation of images is not unethical. But when they are protected from examination in interactional systems, often through either invisibility or identity protection, they distort the development of each participant and consensus reached on the subject matter at hand. These images are frequently held in a visual form in our society (Presnell & Deetz, 1982). As iconic images, they have the same condensation of affect that McGee (1980) talks about in “ideographs” in public communication. “Interpersonal icons” are simultaneously linguistic and visual and have the same puzzle-like character of the dreams that Freud discussed as arresting development and distorting communication (Lacan, 1968). They are in a sense under-determined by the practical conditions of their creation and over-determine the response in each new practical situation. These images collect around them a whole set of unexamined beliefs and values which come to be centered in and held by a particular remembered image. When these images are held above examination, the genuine conversation cannot continue. As the talk continues, the response of each participant is interpreted within the context of the image which is not (can not) be discussed. The unethical characteristics of imagistically-based interaction are not to be blamed on the person who forms the image in spite of the personal importance of them. The responsibility for the maintenance of the image is mutually shared by the participants as they produce and reproduce these images in interaction. The interaction system distorts the systematic expression of each participant. The responsibility for the deconstruction of the image is mutually shared since neither party alone can work through it.

Blocked Discourse

Particular discursive practices can either lead to open formation of experience and identity by further exploration of the subject matter or divert, distort, or block the open development of understanding. When discussion is thwarted, a particular view of reality is maintained at the expense of equally plausible ones usually to someone's advantage. It should not be surprising that systems of domination are protected from careful exploration and political advantage is protected and extended. Their continuation provides both security and advantage. The primary effect of these moves is to suppress insight into the conflict nature of experience and preclude careful discussion of and decision making regarding the values implicit in experience, identity, and representation. These are not themselves major value claims or organized strategies. Rarely are they seen in regard to dominating ideologies or the politics of identity and experience. They are rather quiet, repetitive micro practices done for innumerable reasons which function to maintain normalized conflict-free experience and social relations. Neither the particular behaviors nor human motives for using them are at issue, but rather how particular practices function in interaction systems. Unethical practices can be chosen for either the best or worst of reasons. Many
discursive functions have been described. Allow me to briefly outline a few here for illustrative purposes (see Deetz, in press for development).

Disqualification

Habermas (1979) demonstrated that core to every communication community is an assumption (though not always fulfilled) of equal opportunity to select and employ different speech acts for the representation of one's interests. While many have discussed this principle in regard to access to various forums and media, it applies fundamentally to the determination of who has a right to have a say. Disqualification is the discursive process by which individuals are excluded (Bavelas & Chovil, 1986). For example, statements such as, "You're just saying that because you are a woman [manager, lover, angry . . .]," function within certain systems to exclude the expressed view from the discussion. Such an activity skews the development of mutual understanding.

Socially produced notions of expertise, professional qualification, and specialization are central to qualification and in the imposition of the opposite, the disqualification processes. Expertise functions as an ideological fiction, an imaginary relation, and further reproduces itself by proclaiming who has the capacity to determine and question it. For example, in interpersonal relations in corporations, the creation of managerial expertise (and management science to certify, institutionalize, and finally signify it) centers management capacity in certain locations and outside certain groups. Such a placement is, even if diffused in more participatory management, retained as a prerogative by its own assertion of placement. The often subtle processes of deferring, calling in, and studying for, operate like the more explicit forms of dismissal and ignorance in protecting powerful groups' inserted realities and denying the exploration of the implicit values on which they are based.

Naturalization

In open discourse, the subject matter is a constituted/constituting object in relation to interactants. Every perception has a social/historical dimension. In naturalization, one view of the subject matter is frozen as the way the thing is. In this process, the constitution process is closed to inspection and discussion. In a sense, the subject matter has been "silenced" by the claim that someone's conception is what it is. Interactant's "relationship" can be given an entity status and its construction and change become lost to the description of what it is. Or an interactant may proclaim that "that is just the way I am," and hence protect their character from discussion. Naturalization frequently stops discussion at precisely the place where it should be started—the object created stops discussion on the ethical dimensions of its creation.

Social relationships and subjective constructions can be made into objects which are treated as fixed and external. In everyday thought and talk we are often forgetful of the manners of production, even though in careful reflective thought most people know that particular perceptions and relational forms are historical constructions arising in specific circumstances and designed to accomplish practical purposes. In a naturalizing discourse, the social historical processes (whether in the actual production of objects and institutions or in the production of the subject and structures of experience) are removed from view. In treating perceptions as transparent renderings of the external world, the concepts, methods, and practices of perception production are made invisible.
Naturalism always plays in the privileging and marginalizing of discourses. For example, suggested differences between male and female emotional reactions can be claimed to be naturally occurring. In making such a claim these reactions are treated as natural and self-evident, thus justify the necessity of their presence to the advantage or disadvantage of both males and females. Quite apart from the descriptive adequacy of such differences, the claim of naturalness or based on observation often places the claim beyond valutational examination. The "is" can preclude the concern of "ought" and more importantly "how"—that is, in what manner is it observed and produced. Not only is Aristotle’s ancient view of natural laws overlooked (the fact that people are usually "naturally" right-handed does not keep the left from being developed as well), but makes the difference a truth claim and obscures how the claim of truth politically works to preclude discussion and development.

Neutralization

Neutralization refers to the process by which value positions become hidden and value-laden activities are treated as if they were value-free. Not only are socially constructed objects and processes treated as natural objects, but the values in the construction process are forgotten as arbitrary and chosen. Different groups in a society perceive and interpret events using different values. Every linguistic distinction is an attention, a valuing. In the neutralization of language, language does not lose its valuing, rather one system of valuing is treated as the only possible one. A possible world is treated as the world.

Presumed “objective” claims hide both the activities that produced the claim and the values carried with them. For example, just giving the “data” or the “facts” hides the criteria used to choose these rather than other observations and the conceptual frame which produced the “facts” and “data” in the first place. In the same sense that the documentary film is often the most difficult film to critique, since the politics in it are hidden by the proclamation of the “real,” judgments disguised as descriptions often effectively block the open construction of the “facts.”

Topical Avoidance

Every social group prohibits or discourages the discussion of some events and feelings. Often these surround significant areas of potential conflict, e.g., no religion or politics at family gatherings. While these prohibitions are motivated to enhance propriety and order, they often preclude a discussion of the values which define propriety and order and the benefits to certain groups from those values. A dominant view thus can hide the variety of views potentially demanded by the subject matter. Foucault (1980) demonstrated this well in terms of sexual discourse. Gilligan (1988) documents much of the same in her treatment of adolescent girls’ struggles with their relational attachments and the forces against these attachments in contemporary society, a tension which renders them mute. Males can be muted in a different way—in the most bold way that Wolfe (1987) described, “masters of the universe” don’t cry. From teamsterville to “he-man” places of expression and topics of talk are highly constrained and constrained to certain ends (Phillipsen, 1975). The corporate prohibition against interpersonal expression of personal doubts and problems at home essentially hides the home and removes the corporation from having to change

Effectiveness and Ethics in Interpersonal Interaction 237
or account for these problems. Their hidden quality makes them the employee's problem even if they result from work related experiences.

All topical avoidance leads to systematically distorted communication and not only because the interaction must be structured to go around and leave out. The internal state of the person can already experience the exclusion. Bodily states are fundamentally ambiguous. The focus and channeling of physiological excitation is socially constructed. Males in a corporate environment may not “feel” betrayal or hurt but directly feel anger or the drive to control. Only in reflection can the same state in the same context be seen as “betrayal” or “hurt”; feelings that more spontaneously arise in some females. Who has or does not have certain feelings is an ethical question. The systematic exclusion of humanly experienceable emotions avoids certain “topics” and thus the concealment of conflict—the conflict over what this physiological state “is.”

**Subjectification of Experience**

A focus on personal experience and the embracing of relativism are common features of today's society (Adorno, 1973; Maclntyre, 1984). Many communication writings still begin with the claim that meaning is in people even though the theories on which such an idea were based have been largely dismissed as inadequate and misleading. More sophisticated reader-response theories that focus on subjective interpretation processes might, on the surface, appear to be concerned with alternative value systems but often have the opposite effect. Private decisionalism and relativism appear open to others but usually function to preclude questioning of normal routines and assure closure of experience. The produced identity is taken as a given rather than social formation and the acceptance of the privilege of the personal precludes the examination of that social formation. The proclamation in interaction that the issue is “a matter of opinion” is a frequently casual move used to end the discussion. From the standpoint of participation, this is where it should begin. The difference between opinions represents the opportunity to escape from self-blinders and indicates that more is to be learned about the issue. In fact, it represents a major reason to seriously talk at all. The micro-politics of opinion protection are important. When meaning is personalized, difference of opinion can only be resolved in power politics rather than in examining the politics of opinion formation.

**Meaning Denial**

Every expression has several possible meanings, such is inevitable in the structure of interaction. Meaning denial happens when one possible interpretation of a statement is both present in the interaction and denied as meant. The most obvious interpersonal example of this is when someone shouts at you and then proclaims that they are not angry. This is certainly nearly always present with inappropriate sexual innuendo in corporate talk. A message is present and disclaimed; said and not said. The effect is to shift meaning production to the listener, thus enabling the speaker control without responsibility and precluding the critical examination of what was said (because it was not said). The listener responds to the “message” based only on their own produced meaning, but in a context where if they do not respond to it the message can be reevoked as said, e.g., “I don’t care what I said, you knew I was angry.” Consent and unowned control build with such practices.
Reopening Conversation

The descriptions of blockages here has been very brief, but even if space permitted extended development, descriptive accounts are only a beginning. If we can describe these practices in ethical terms, we take on a community-based commitment to reopen the development of understanding. The final section of this paper will give initial suggestions as to how these stoppages can be overcome and conversation reopened. Three elements will be discussed here: metacommunication, rhetoric, and strategy.

Metacommunication

One way blockage is removed in interpersonal systems is through the critical examination of the blockages themselves—a type of social therapeutic deconstruction. This involves a reflection on the interaction to determine the conditions of the stoppage and engagement in discourse about the stoppage itself. This can open the protected belief structures and values to critical examination. Such an attempt interpersonally resembles Toulmin's model for argumentation (Deetz, 1983; Habermas, 1984). When agreement on the matter is impossible, the warrants must be raised to examination. With continued lack of consensus, the backing for the warrants needs to be examined through a progressive radicalization of the discourse. This allows the determination of adequacy of the hidden foundations for elements which influence the interaction. In the genuine conversation the warrants are continuously reformed through the question of the other's statement and the formation of joint understanding. When the conversation is blocked, one choice is to turn and explicitly examine them.

Training in metacommunication needs to be training in discovery of interpersonal ideologies and the structures of those ideologies so that in turning and looking at the interaction, participants can discover and examine the things that have been left uncritically assumed. In this examination that which is taken for granted in normally allowing the conversation to proceed is reopened for joint formation. Such a process has been discussed by Morris and Hopper (1980) as alignment procedures. It is not always possible, of course, to raise interaction to the level of metacommunication nor is it always possible in doing so that the metacommunication can have that genuine quality. Because of this we must look at attempts, beyond critical reflection, to other means by which the conversation might be reopened.

Rhetoric

Generally the study of rhetoric has focused on the invention of messages for the sake of gaining adherence to the speaker's point of view. Recent work by McKerrow (1989) and Valesio (1980) demonstrated that this is an inadequate concept of rhetoric both in terms of its classical foundation and function in discourse. The rhetorical dimension of interaction, private or public, is the politics of the interaction. In Valesio's (1980) sense, rhetoric happens in the attempt to subvert the dominant opinion—that is, to pose another possible position. Rhetoric's function is to make possible discussion where there appears to be no need for discussion. In this sense, rhetorical expression is by its existence a question for any apparent consensus, any closure on the issue. Rhetoric essentially works against the suppression of opinion through its apparent attempt to advocate a position. To be rhetorical is to present the
message in such a way as to maximize the possibility of participation in the interaction. Rhetoric is not essentially in the service of replacing one opinion with another but in the resistance of any position being raised above discourse. This gives a different but more fundamental meaning to Hart and Burks’ (1972) concept of rhetorical sensitivity. Interpersonal rhetorical sensitivity is both effective and ethical in the sense that it alone allows the interpenetration of self and other. Such sensitivity brings the subject matter into maximum relevance to both participants. When understood and practiced in this fashion, rhetoric, rather than standing outside of ethical communication or as a problem for it as in the frequently pejorative connotations of it, is essential for the continued participation in genuine conversation.

**Strategy**

In proposing the two general manners of reopening conversation discussed thus far, I have essentially argued that critical reflected reason and rhetoric can stand in opposition to ideology. In this last section I wish to deal with the most troublesome issue of all. What if reason and rhetoric are not enough? This, it seems, may frequently be the case since people have considerable vested interest in maintaining ideologically founded interactional systems. They have reasons for wanting discourse to be stopped due to fears of what might come if a genuine conversation could take place. Individuals actively work against the development of interpersonal systems which might enable the collective formation of opinion in order to protect opinions already in place, identities, and images of themselves which they already have. In these cases, strategy seems to be the only remaining possibility. Strategy may be necessary to develop systems of interaction in which genuine conversation is possible. Without a consideration of strategy, the genuine conversation can remain as only an ideal in certain practical contexts (Apel, 1979). Strategy is necessary in absence of mutual assent.

Ethically, strategy cannot be supported in the advocacy of one’s own position whether that position is about some issue or the very nature of the relationship desired with the other person. Strategy is discussed here only as an appropriate means to enable an unconstrained interpersonal system. The suggestion of strategy here is little different from Buber’s attempt to discuss what one does in a real situation given the lack of a mutual commitment to the development of the community (Friedman, 1960). It is important to explore what strategic actions are possible and appropriate in the various interpersonal contexts. In the public context, strategy might involve political action, symbolic acts, and system disruption. Appropriate strategies in interpersonal contexts would probably follow the lines proposed in “brief therapy” (Watzlawick, Weakland & Frisch, 1974). Obviously the conception needs work, but I hope to have established a direction for that work.

**Summary**

Personal identity and mutual understanding are primary products of interpersonal interaction. Descriptive accounts of interpersonal relationships and the interaction in them need to be augmented by a careful account of the ethical concerns raised by the nature of identity formation and mutual understanding. Ethical ideals drawn from the “free speech and informed public” democratic tradition fail to appreciate meaning production as well as meaning reproduction as a communication process. This tradition, like the humanist tradition which is often used to supplement it, have largely
focused on the individual and the sanctity of personal expression. But the social formation of understanding and communal good arising in consideration of interpersonal systems poses ethical question beyond these traditions.

Here I have briefly presented Gadamer's ontology of understanding through his description of the genuine conversation as a social, developmental foundation for interpersonal system ethics. If interaction is conceptualized in light of the demand that the subject matter can give to guide open mutual understanding, ethical concern can be directed at processes that prohibit this development. Examples are given of processes by which "conversation" is stopped. Each of these examples of possible blockages to genuine conversation are obviously too brief and underdeveloped to make any definitive claims or to give explicit guidance to interpersonal communication instructional practice. The number of illustrative practices could easily be extended. But the concept of ethics here is a beginning and hopefully provides a frame for further development. This is an initial conception of the character of human understanding and beginning illustrations of communication systems that limit and distort the interpersonal formation of understanding. Implicit in this is a research agenda to carefully describe these blocked interactions and an instructional agenda to enable participants to overcome them.

REFERENCES


Effectiveness and Ethics in Interpersonal Interaction 241


