Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM):

A Critique of W. Barnett Pearce & Vernon Cronen’s Theory

In Em Griffin’s *A First Look at Communication Theory*

Grace Kim

Chapman University
I. INTRODUCTION

Over 30 years ago, Pearce and Cronen founded the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) Theory that was designed to solve pressing social problems and issues to create a better social world. The CMM theorizes that our social worlds are fabricated and constructed by our own actions. Since its birth, the CMM concepts have been applied to solve intellectual problems and social issues in a variety of ways by therapists, consultants, mediators, teachers, and researchers. This paper will explore the theory and synthesize its characteristics and then critiques Em Griffin’s coverage of the theory in his book A First Look at Communication Theory. Finally, the paper concludes with an evaluation of its hybridized occupancy in the interpretive and critical paradigms.

II. SYNTHESIS

A. WHAT IS THE COORDINATED MANAGEMENT OF MEANING?

The Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) is a theory founded by Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen who both believe that the process of communication creates our social worlds. Pearce and Cronen, taken from Harré, emphasize that at the heart of CMM are persons-in-conversations who “co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create” (Griffin, 2012, p. 70). By decoding the process and pattern of communication, the CMM theory allows for intervention to improve communication. Every conversation is believed to have an afterlife where social interactions made in the present influence the social reality in the future.

Since the introduction of the theory in 1978, CMM has been labeled in three different directions. First, it was expressed as an interpretive theory, to a critical theory, and then a practical theory. Pearce and Cronen have always viewed the CMM theory as an interpretive
theory with a critical edge. But since the 1990s, Pearce and Cronen also recognize it as a practical theory “crafted to make life better for real people in the real world” (Griffin, 2012, p. 67). They believe the CMM theory offers practical tools that mediators, workers, consultants, therapists, social workers, and teachers can all use to foster a positive social environment. CMM theorists view themselves as curious participants living in a pluralistic world under ever-changing conditions.

The proponents of CMM refer to themselves as social constructionists who believe that our social worlds are not something that is found or discovered but is created. Moreover, the social worlds we create take the shape of stories. CMM notes that the way and form of communication shapes who the interactants are and the relationship more than the actual words or content of the messages themselves. During the performative process of communicating, people become trapped in the “logic of meaning and action” that is made in the reflexivity of conversations. CMM accounts for the long-term effects of communication practices because if communication patterns go unchecked, they can be a destructive spiral of never ending conflict. Hence, CMM theorists, mediators, therapists, and consultants search for the “logical force” in communication patterns preparing for intervention in order to have better communication.

B. CMM AS A PRACTICAL THEORY

The goal is to identify the cyclical pattern of communication and then change the form of communication in order to create a more favorable social world. CMM levels of meaning are used to construct the episodes, relationships, identities, and cultural patterns between the interactants in order to identify the pattern of communication.

For example, Griffin explains this step describing a case in family therapy (Griffin, 2012, p. 68). A father and mother came in to speak to a therapist about their son with Asperger’s
syndrome. The son and his parents were trapped in a repetitive cycle also known as a strange loop. When the parents accepted the fact their son had Asperger’s syndrome, they treated their son in a forgiving and compassionate way. But whenever the parents treated their child that way, it would make the son behave normally and healthier. This led the parents to conclude that he was misdiagnosed and did not have Asperger’s syndrome. This interpretation made sense to the parents within their own subsystem of meanings and wanted to believe their son did not have the syndrome. As a result, the parents would act less compassionately toward their son under the belief that he did not have Asperger. In turn, the son’s behavior would grow worse and then the parents would re-believe in the original diagnosis of Asperger’s syndrome. Hence, the cycle would repeat itself.

The therapist noticed this never-ending strange loop of conflict and guided the parents to focus on “what they were making together rather than what their son had or didn’t have, their chances of escaping from this loop were increased” (Griffin, 2012, p. 68). The CMM theory help describe the reflexive process of action and interpretation that the parents were co-constructing with each other and their son. The parents were asked to evaluate what kind of relationship they wanted with their son and if their current form of communication was fostering the relationship that they truly wanted (Griffin, 2012, p. 68). This family therapy case exemplifies the practical uses of the CMM theory.

Griffin explains that in order for the CMM theory to be successful, practitioners must structure a social setting where dialogic communication is encouraged. The goal is to change from cyclical communication to dialogic communication “in which people from all types of backgrounds can [speak] in a manner that [make] others want to listen, and listen in a way that [make] others want to speak” (Griffin, 2012, p. 69). The goal is to enable the participants to
communicate dialogically beyond what was initially thought was acceptable. For instance, Griffin describes an example called the Cupertino Community Project that was conducted within the community because of issues in ethnic diversity (Griffin, 2012). The community was facing issues such as the Mandarin immersion program, public signs only written in Chinese, and a multicultural Fourth of July. Cupertino conducted a “Diversity Forum” as a place to be comfortable to voice different points of view. Facilitators were trained in the CMM method to make participants comfortable speaking dialogically by holding their own perspective while being profoundly open to others different from themselves. The Cupertino Project transformed the social environment for the community and reduced the race and ethnic diversity problem by 2% from residents. It serves as an example of an effective usage of the CMM theory.

C. CMM AS PART OF THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST PARADIGM

CMM theorists also refer to themselves as social constructionists who “believe that important things happen in the give-and-take between real people whether these occur in my house, the courthouse, or the White House; and that the language we use and the form of communication we are in—debates, dialogue, discussion, arguments, and so on—have consequences” (Pearce, 2012, p. 45).

Barnett Pearce (2009) believes CMM should be discussed from a social construction approach (Pearce, 2009, p. 36). He explains that social constructionists have shared commitments with CMM theorists because the virtues of social constructionism lie in its “energy, creativity, and diversity, not consistency” (Pearce, 2009, p. 39). The CMM theory was born when diversity was at its peak and after the Civil Rights Movement when diversity was respected. The commonality between social constructionism and the CMM theory is in their “fuzzy edges” that evolves quickly and unevenly in our social realities. However, the crucial
difference between the two is that CMM acknowledges diversity and pluralism and aims to transform the culture by changing the ways of we communicate, while social constructionism is less diverse.

The CMM theory is also related to the philosophical branch called pragmatism by John Dewey. According to Jia (2005), pragmatism “privileges ongoing dynamic interrelations among all forces over rigid conceptual dichotomies” and “privileges social construction over pre-social structuration” (Jia, 2005, p. 101). Like the CMM theory, Dewey viewed the functions of language and communication as the creators of the social world. The philosopher explicitly recognized that language is socially developed because “meaning is social and acquired by individuals who participate in the social” (Jia, 2005, p. 104). The Coordinated Management of Meaning is ultimately grounded on what Dewey proposes of what constitutes pragmatism. The task of the CMM theory is to systematically uncover the structures in our grammar and dialogue to make sense of it and correct it in order to reconstruct a better social world. Parallel in meaning, the pragmatic philosophy also has the “gigantic task to create a systemic language which is non-dualistic, action-oriented and intimate with relations, processes and even uncertainty and chaos” (Jia, 2005, p. 104). Thus, the CMM theory shares the same agendas and characteristics of that of the social constructionist paradigm and philosophy of pragmatism.

III. CRITIQUE OF GRIFFIN’S ANALYSIS

A. THOROUGHNESS

Griffin’s introduction and critique of Pearce and Cronen’s Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory is evaluated using three criteria: thoroughness, originality, and accuracy. Griffin’s analysis is very thorough. He begins the chapter with the origins and history of CMM and outlines the three viewpoints of CMM in significant detail. He dives deeper into how the
CMM theory is considered interpretive, practical, and critical. First, Griffin gives three different situations to demonstrate the practical applications of the CMM theory. He details a family therapist’s case, a mediator’s couple case, and the Cupertino project to show how the CMM theory is also practical. Then Griffin lists the different characteristics of the CMM theory that make it interpretive using examples such as the Bond of Union lithograph to illustrate the notion of persons-in-conversation. Griffin clearly and repeatedly states that communication takes form in the shape of stories that are created rather than found. This is a statement that is found in many other sources by Pearce and Cronen. He goes into further detail of how the CMM theory falls under the interpretive paradigm by distinguishing stories told from stories lived that are always in tension. He shows how coordination can take place even when there is tension in the management of meaning. CMM is lastly explained as critical because there is a way to intervene the logical force of conversations to set apart the harmful forms of communication from the helpful ones. Griffin also discusses Martin Buber’s dialogic ethics and findings, stories, excerpts, and cases from Pearce and Cronen that help explain CMM in easy-to-understand terms.

However, Griffin fails to identify the tools of the CMM theory. It is not clear exactly what methodology the CMM proposes to study and how to make changes in the system. He only explains that tools and protocols exist for CMM theorists but does not describe them in detail. My research has found that Pearce and Cronen delineate their tools in their studies. The tools that were not mentioned but are cited in CMM research are: systematic questioning, also known as circular questioning (Spano, 2001; Pearce, 2002); aspect-seeing (Wittgenstein, 1953); thick description (Rawls, 1971; Geertz, 1973), and many others. Including the specific types of tools would have substantiated and have made the arguments in the chapter more valid.
B. ORIGINALITY

Griffin was very original in his examples, facts, and details. He was particularly original in his examples that demonstrated the theory and included diagrams that illustrated the theory at hand. For example, Griffin presents the Hierarchical Serpentine Model to demonstrate the hierarchical nature of storytelling (Griffin, 2012, p. 74). The model helps the reader think of CMM communication process as a schematic diagram. This is an extension from his original example of Escher’s *Bond of Union* lithograph where images of two heads are intertwined in a ribbon-like pattern (Griffin, 2012, p. 71).

Griffin also uses a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip to describe the constructs, coherence without coordination, and the meshing of stories lived (Griffin, 2012, p. 76). In the comic, Calvin and Hobbes are playing a game where Calvin steals Hobbes’ flag but Hobbes hits Calvin with the ball. Hobbes demands that Calvin sing the “I’m Very Sorry Song” but Calvin initially refuses arguing that he was in the “No song zone” when he was hit. Hobbes declares the opposite and asks him to sing. Ultimately, they sing together and then they go again to play a new game by different rules. Calvin and Hobbes “coordinated without coherence”, working together but for different reasons.

The author also uses the example of former President George W. Bush’s address on the night of the 9/11 attacks (Griffin, 2012). He famously labeled the event “war of terror” which was reproduced into a reciprocated diatribe. According to Pearce, the President lost the opportunity to resolve the conflict. Instead, the creation of calling the other side “evil” was not likely to resolve the conflict. Griffin presents the importance of interpretation and CMM’s interventionist quality in an original way and backs his arguments with supporting examples.
C. ACCURACY

Griffin’s use of clear, real life examples, illustrations, and simple summaries of cited works help explain the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory comes across as accurate, relatable, and a reliable resource. He incorporated passages from other people’s personal situations in order to fully express a point. For example, when he explained the construct, coordination without coherence, he follow ups with “Sarah’s application log” describing her group of friends in high school who all abstained from drinking, drugs, and sex but for entirely different reasons. This was very good example of the construct that strongly validated the concept. He accurately cited the most popular scholars on the theory such as Pearce, Cronen, Buber, Barge, Harré, and others very specifically. Griffin uses Harré’s term “persons-in-conversation”, Pearce’s Serpentine model, and Chen’s Cupertino Project case study to exemplify what the CMM theory embodies. Griffin succeeds to eloquently describe the theory to the utmost detail and research.

IV. COMMUNICATION THEORY PARADIGM STANDARDS

A. INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM

The Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory is part of the interpretive paradigm and socio-cultural tradition where communication is the enactment and creation of social reality. Theories that are interpretive uncover shared patterns of meaning, describe and interpret cultural distinctiveness, and value the native viewpoint. For a theory to be interpretive, it must follow its evaluative standards. The first standard is the new understanding of people. The CMM theory highlights that meaning is created through reflexive dialogue and person-to-person communication. CMM theorists call themselves the peacemakers and the theory is used in
mediation, therapy, teaching, and consulting settings. CMM identifies the pattern of communication to intervene the spiraling conflict and promote better communication.

The second interpretive standard is the clarification of values, which describes and interprets the cultural distinctiveness by elaborating the different world views, beliefs, values, and patterns of communication embedded in texts, artifacts, and social discourse (Griffin, 2012). The CMM takes into account the different values and perspectives of the interactants in order to uncover the pattern of communication and is defined as a tool to help understand flawed patterns of interaction, identify critical moments in conversations, and suggests ways to communicate for a better social environment.

The third standard highlights the aesthetic appeal of the theory because the interpretive paradigm is open to creativity and can spark appreciation from the reader. In contrast, the objective paradigm is limited in this aspect because they are bound to the traditional standards of scientific writing requiring hypotheses and operationalized variables. The interpretive, on the other hand, can use artful illustrations, diagrams, metaphors, and stories to convey their social creations with others. The CMM succeeds in this dimension because it uses stories, narratives, and famous paintings to depict the concept in the reader’s minds. For example, Pearce (2009) begins his paper with a narrative of Jennifer Senior who wrote an article featured on National Public Radio’s “Talk of the Nation” (Pearce, 2009). Pearce tells the story of the interview and how Senior created the term “burn-out” and introduced it to the category of mental illness in psychology. Pearce draws attention to the fact that the word “burn-out” was a social creation even when there could have been a variety of other ways to express Senior’s experience. For instance, Senior could have just been lazy and had to work harder, or she that was possessed by evil spirits, or that she had do something different because the world was against her (Pearce,
Instead, Senior identified her situation with the word “burn-out”. This narrative does an excellent job in illustrating the CMM concept of social construction. Nevertheless, critics of the theory think the CMM theory lacks in clarity because it offers no clear way to intervene and uncover patterns of communication. The process is only somewhat described by examples or case studies where the CMM technique is employed. But in essence, the CMM theory can be convoluted and difficult to pin down eroding its aesthetic appeal.

The final interpretive standard is that an interpretive theory must elicit a community of agreement. There must be a strong degree of receptiveness among scholars so that the theory can evolve, be adjusted, and improved upon for continuous use. The CMM is well known within the communication research field. Many researchers have tested the theory using qualitative methods such as interviews, case studies, observations, narratives, and action research (Barge & Pearce, 2004, p. 13-32). Barge’s and Pearce’s essay synthesizes close to a hundred research studies in the CMM tradition, which is actually considered under reported research. This fact alone is enough to argue that the CMM theory is sensible and well established theory and enough to be relevant to five streams: “(1) interpersonal and intercultural communication, (2) organizational communication and management, (3) public communication, (4) therapy and consultation, and (5) conflict, mediation, and dialogue” (Barge & Pearce, 2004, p. 13).

B. CRITICAL PARADIGM

The Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory is more commonly accepted to not be a part of the critical paradigm because power is not seen as the main determinant of human interaction but rather communication is at the forefront of the analysis. Regardless, the CMM theory is said to have a “critical edge”. According to Chen (2004), the theory should not be seen simply as an interpretive theory. Instead, Chen asserts that from a pragmatist as well as systemic
perspective, CMM can identify the power imbalances in relationships (Chen, 2004). Chen grants it that there has not been much research done on CMM power but she emphasizes that the CMM theory “studies human interaction by attending to social conversations and activities in which power is constituted, displayed and performed, and therefore made real” (Chen, 2004, p. 183). We see this in Cronen’s CMM work that specifically examines individual identity not as a reproduction from a social basis, but instead formed from the communication practices that reconstitute one’s identity (Cronen, et al., 1988; Cronen & Lang, 1994). These kinds of CMM studies are implicitly critical because they investigate the dominant power structures that give meaning and weight to individual voices.

The first critical standard constitutes that the theory should systematically unmask the ideologies in communication practices. In the language of CMM, power dynamics become real and power differentials emerge as participants make sense of their experience in mediation, group dialogues, and other social settings. This is similar to the critical cultural studies if we are to compare and contrast it to the CMM theory. Chen claims that the major difference between these two theories is that the cultural studies elicits changes by highlighting the system that oppresses whereas the CMM does not impose this type of socially constructed knowledge on the phenomenon being studied (Chen, 2004). Rather, it focuses on “the possibilities for enhancing the conditions of human life” (Cronen, et al., 1988, p. 68) by foregrounding communication instead of power (Chen, 2004). The CMM theory is to be used as a “lens through which the social world can be interpreted and critiqued” (Cronen, et al., 1988, p. 70). Therefore, CMM fits the first criteria of disclosing the ideologies individuals carry by evaluating the communication practices of each person.

The second standard of CMM is the systematic uncovering of power imbalances or
injustices of ideologies embedded in the discourse. The tools in the Coordinated Management of Meaning can be used systematically to unveil the ideologies in communication. For example, systematic questioning is seen as a critical protocol to explore issues of power, identity, and difference. Through an ongoing discussion of storytelling, listening, questioning, challenging and reflecting on the conversations and words created, participants gradually become aware of their social position, and how much power and privileges that comes along with the position (Chen, 2004). Therefore, the CMM theory makes the grade in unmasking the power imbalances in society even though power is not at the foreground of the theory.

The third criterion is the community of agreement that requires wide scrutiny and usage of the critical change agents, social and academic activists. The CMM theory has been written about, praised, and analyzed by a community of scholars and practitioners of CMM since its origination in 1978. There many published papers on the topic and many unpublished Master’s and doctoral dissertations that study CMM. According to Barge and Pearce (2004), there is also a “sense of unrealized potential due to missed opportunities, under-reported research, and prematurely abandoned research programs” (Barge & Pearce, 2004, p. 26). The CMM theory research provides an impressive empirical basis for treating CMM as sensible and useful in both research and practice.

The CMM lastly meets the final criterion that calls for alternatives, policy change, and social action to take place for a better or worse future. Wide ranges of professionals including therapists, researchers, consultants, managers, teachers, and psychologists have applied the Coordinated Management of Meaning concepts to intellectual problems and social issues in a variety of ways. (Barge & Pearce, 2004, p. 13).
C. OBJECTIVE PARADIGM

The Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory is not an objective theory because it does not meet the scientific standards to occupy this paradigm. The first standard is the explanation of the data that focuses its attention on crucial variables and tries to make sense of order out of chaos. Research methods reviewed by the CMM theory “include direct observation, questionnaires, interviews, rhetorical criticism, historical analysis, focus groups, and textual/discourse analysis” (Barge & Pearce, 2004, p. 25). The research designs include “experiments, surveys, case studies, and collaborative action projects” (Barge & Pearce, 2004, p. 25). The CMM theory’s evolution started as an interpretive social science as first published by Pearce and Cronen in 1980, then developed a critical edge during the 1980s, and currently expresses itself as a “practical theory”. As a result, “the predominant research methods have changed from quantitative experiments, surveys and case studies to hermeneutic case studies and various forms of textual, narrative, and discourse analysis” (Barge & Pearce, 2004, p. 25). Therefore, the CMM does not use data to explain its findings as required for an objective theory.

The next standard is the prediction of future events. The CMM theory does not predict the event but rather looks to identify the patterns in communication to intervene our social worlds to improve it. The third standard is relative simplicity. The CMM is a complex theory that comprise of many tools, terms, models, and vocabulary. It is far from simple as an objective theory would require.

The fourth criterion is that an objective theory must have a hypothesis that can be tested. If there is no way to prove the theory false, then it is consider mere guesswork in the scientific community. A hypothesis is a defining feature of an objective theory according to Karl Popper’s falsifiability principle. The CMM theory does not require a hypothesis for testing.
Another feature of the objective paradigms is practical utility. Robert Craig and a many other users of the theory cite that the CMM is an exemplar of a practical theory. However, Barge disagrees and adds that practitioners need to “establish when CMM tools are helpful and when they aren’t. More work needs to be done” (Griffin, 2013, p. 81). Barge (2004) notes that there are three challenges the CMM theory faces in being a practical theory: “(1) developing the reflexive relationship between CMM as a practical theory and grammars of practice, (2) articulating the contexts in which CMM is useful or not useful as a practical theory, and (3) elaborating the ethical position of CMM” (Barge, 2004, p. 193). Therefore, the CMM theory does not address each challenge from the practical standpoint and thus, the theory does not fulfill this standard of objective paradigm or at least not yet.

Lastly, a theory cannot be objective without quantitative research. An objective theory relies on its quantitative findings using surveys and experiments. But the CMM theory primarily uses qualitative methods for its research. Hence, the CMM does not fall under the branch of the objective paradigm.

V. CONCLUSION

The Coordinated Management of Meaning consists of viewing the events and objects of the social world as made, co-constructed by the coordinated actions of persons-in-conversation. According to Kimberly and Barnett Pearce (2000), the CMM perspective is grounded in the belief that what is created by person-in-conversation is what actually creates our dominating realities, social worlds, ideologies, decisions, and personalities (Pearce & Pearce, 2000).

The CMM is a widely used theory but it also has evolved in many ways. First starting as an interpretive theory in 1978, then critical, and now expressed as practical. CMM has proved itself useful in a variety of social settings to communicate with people under social pressures and
problems in their relationships. The results can be profoundly influential and positive on the individual whose voice is heard and integrated into the process of improving our social worlds.

Griffin’s explanation of the Coordinated Management of Meaning was insightful, well researched, and credible. Griffin proves that the CMM is a theory that progresses social changes and is powerful enough to study and dissect phenomenon that occurs in human relations. It conclusively belongs in the interpretive and critical paradigms, and will continue to be regarded as prominent theory that claims that individuals construct their identities from the social. Equipped with this knowledge, we can ultimately improve our relational developments and initiate communal changes.
References


