Articulating CMM as a practical theory

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ABSTRACT

This essay evaluates how practitioners have used CMM as a practical theory. Based on how practitioners have used CMM, I highlight three challenges for future work in practical theorizing: (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. By exploring the connections between CMM and other social theories and altering the way we report our research studies, these challenges can be addressed.

Introduction

Coordinated Management of Meaning theory (CMM) has been positioned as a general theory of communication since its inception in the late 1970s. However, the kind of general communication theory CMM ascribes to be has evolved over time as it has moved from being characterized initially as an interpretive theory (Harris & Cronen, 1979), to a critical theory (Cronen, Chen & Pearce, 1988), and most recently, as a practical theory (Cronen, 1994; 1995; 2001; Cronen & Chetro-Szivos, 2001). Cronen (2001) conceptualizes practical theory as an instrumentality or tool, which "informs a grammar of practice that facilitates joining with the grammar of others to explore their unique patterns of action" (p. 26). A practical theory offers a variety of tools such as definitions, descriptions, and models that facilitate inquirers exploring the unique, situated, patterns of coordinated activity within human systems such as families, work teams, communities, and societies.

Cronen's position represents a unique take on what constitutes practical theory. The term practical theory has been used in a variety of ways in social theory ranging from the localized description individuals create during the course of interaction to help make sense of the situation and to guide their action (Cunliffe, 2002) to an observer's description of the problems and technical moves that individuals use to manage these problems within a particular practice (Craig & Tracy, 1995). Cronen's approach to practical theory evolves from his idea that CMM is a practical theory and provides a comprehensive frame for organizing relationships among phenomena. This suggests that practical theories are distinct from localized descriptions of situations and the grammar of practice that individuals develop to engage situations. Practical theory becomes one of many possible resources that practitioners may draw on to guide their practice. Cronen (1995) is quite clear on this point as he observes that the formulations of a practical theory are not themselves a grammar of practice as a "grammar of practice refers to the abilities a professional brings to a situation, joining with the abilities of others" and that these professional abilities are "informed by a coherent way of going on—the practical theory" (p. 233).

If CMM is a practical theory, how can we judge whether it is a useful theory and has been helpful in informing a practitioner's grammar of practice? One starting point for answering this question would be to apply Cronen's (1995) general standards for assessing practical theory to CMM: (1) Practical theory should focus on embodied situated actions within the real world; (2) Practical theory should enable practitioners to join and respect the centrality of others' grammars; (3) Practical theories should make our lives better; (4) Practical theories should be internally consistent and defensible; and (5) A reflexive relationship between practical theory and grammars of practice should exist such that a practical theory can inform and join a grammar of practice and a grammar of practice can influence the shape and form of a practical theory. Using these standards, it is readily apparent that CMM is a well-developed practical theory that has developed a variety of tools such as the hierarchy of meaning (Pearce & Cronen, 1980) and strange loops (Cronen, Johnson, & Lannamann, 1982) to create thick descriptions of patterns of coordination within human systems that enhance the abilities of professionals as they engage with the grammar of members of human systems to improve the human condition and make better social worlds.

However, given that Cronen (1995, 2001) invented these standards out of his work with CMM, there is more than a hint of circularity involved. A more useful approach is to turn outward, examining the whole community of people who have used CMM as a practical theory and evaluate its success. Given the accumulation during the last 30 years of over 100 articles and book chapters rooted in CMM (Barge & Pearce, this issue), it is possible to inquire into how professional inquirers such as academics, therapists, and consultants have used CMM as a practical theory. In this essay, I highlight how issues regarding reflexivity, utility, and ethics have been managed within the community of practitioners who have used CMM as a practical theory, identify the challenges these issues pose for those wanting to use CMM as a practical theory, and offer some preliminary ideas for addressing these challenges.

Reflexivity

Practical theory evolves through its reflexive relationship with practice meaning that theory should inform our practice and the consequences of our practice should yield new insights for revising our theories. CMM provides a collection of powerful descriptive-diagnostic tools that inform the practice of professional inquirers and elaborates their ability to explore how persons-in-conversation coordinate their actions with one another and the kinds of consequences that are produced: (1) prefigurative, practical, and logical forces (Pearce & Cronen, 1980, pp. 164-168), (2) constitutive and regulative rules (Pearce & Cronen, 1980, pp. 141-144), (3) the hierarchy of meaning or atomic model (Pearce, 1994), (4) types of conversational episodes (Cronen, Pearce, & Snavely, 1979), (5) forms of communication (Pearce, 1989), (6) strange and charmed loops (Cronen, Johnson, & Lannamann, 1982), and (7) the serpentine model of communication (Pearce, 1994, pp. 30-33). Practitioners use these tools to develop detailed case studies that describe how social actors co-create their unique and local patterns of communication. For example, the hierarchy of meaning has been employed by therapeutic practitioners to characterize the contexts

clients use to make sense of their lived experience (Hannah, 1994; Lewis & Kavanagh, 1995) as well as by academic practitioners to describe the form and structure of mediation episodes (Shailor, 1994). Similarly, the concepts of strange, charmed, and subversive loops have been used frequently by consultants to describe patterns of stuckness within human systems (Oliver, 1996) as well as by academic practitioners to analyze communication dilemmas such contextual reconstruction within public communication (Branham & Pearce, 1987).

What is clear from the existing research is that a variety of practitioners have taken CMM concepts and ideas and used it to inform their practice. What is less clear is how the insights from the emerging grammars of practice within the therapeutic, consultancy, and academic communities have influenced CMM as a practical theory. Most of the practitioner articles from the therapeutic and consultancy communities do a marvelous job of explaining how CMM can be applied to understand, diagnose, and comprehend situations, but for the most part do not turn the results of the practice back on CMM and assess the implications for theory. To be sure, some notable exceptions exist. For example, Oliver (1996) developed the notion of systemic eloquence, an ability to make judgments about the need to introduce certain forms of coordination based on a set of relational ethical commitments such a courage, humility, and generosity. She showed how creating moral positions in conversation through systemic eloquence were simultaneously enabled by the use of CMM concepts and how the concept of systemic eloquence elaborated CMM's work on moral orders and positioning. Similarly, Pearce and Pearce (2001) demonstrated how the evolving grammar of practice regarding the Cupertino Community Dialogue Project, a project aimed at sustaining community dialogue among different stakeholders, developed new CMM concepts such as community dialogue process, the LUUUTT model, and the daisy model and stimulated a reconceptualization of existing CMM concepts such as the episode.

What is striking about the evolution of CMM is how the infusion of new ideas typically has emerged from other theories and not from practice. While practical theory foregrounds grammars of practice as a critical resources for generating new ideas, concepts, and models, the strong emphasis on practice backgrounds an equally important resource for generating practical theory, the connections between a particular practical theory and other practical and social scientific theories. It is this continuous ongoing connection with other theories, philosophies, and models primarily that has fueled CMM's development. Enduring CMM concepts, such as the hierarchy of meaning or atomic model of stories, strange loops, and constitutive and regulative rules, initially emerged from a critical synthesis of existing literature, and not from practice. The hierarchy of meaning was partially informed by Bateson's (1972) notion that meaning is hierarchically organized while elements of constitutive and regulative rules can be traced to speech act theory (Searle, 1969) and von Wright's (1971) notion of deontic logics. More recently, CMM has been linked to a variety of intellectual movements such as American Pragmatism (Dewey, 1938), linguistic theory (Wittgenstein, 1953), and dialogue (Pearce & Pearce, 2001) which has yielded a variety of important concepts such as the system-in-view (Cronen, 2001), moral orders (Cronen & Lang, 1994), and transcendent eloquence (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). The emphasis on the reflexive relationship between practical theory and grammars of practice as being central to

theory development may unintentionally devalue an important resource for developing practical theory, exploring how competing practical theories connect and co-evolve with each other.

Utility

Practical theories are intended to inform patterns of practice that make life better and are judged according to the pragmatic criterion of utility as opposed to an epistemic criterion of truth. CMM has offered several different alternatives for what it means to make people's lives better ranging from enhanced coordination (Pearce, 1976), to liberation (Cronen, Chen, & Pearce, 1988), to cosmopolitan communication (Pearce, 1989). While offering different conceptions of what it means to make our lives better, these different criteria share a common emphasis on persons jointly creating forms of communication that allow them to make perspicacious distinctions, and in light of the distinctions they make, choose ways that enhance their ability to move forward (Cronen & Lang, 1994).

It is clear from the work by practitioners who work with clients in human systems such as therapists and consultants that CMM can make people's lives better. Many case studies have been generated where CMM concepts are used to develop a therapeutic intervention that has led clients to dissolve their problems and move forward (Cronen & Lang, 1994; Oliver, 1992). When working with particular clients or communities, it becomes relatively straightforward to discern when CMM was useful by demonstrating a link between a CMM-inspired intervention and its ability to generate forward movement with others. If a client resists a CMM-inspired intervention during a therapeutic or consultancy episode or if it does not lead to a desirable outcome, this may be taken as evidence that the grammar of practice informed by CMM does not fit at that particular moment in the situation.

Despite the accumulation of case studies, the claim that CMM makes a constructive difference in people's lives requires two important qualifications. First, it is often difficult to demonstrate that CMM is responsible for making people's lives better as opposed to other resources that the theorist or practitioner simultaneously draws on when creating a practical theory for that specific situation. Cronen (2001) points out that practitioners may use other resources to inform their grammar of practice such as intuition, past experiences, as well as other practical theories. For example, Oliver (1996) drew on ideas from systemic family therapy such as circular questioning and reflecting teams in addition to CMM to work with her client. Spano (2001) highlighted how Appreciative Inquiry, dialogue theory, and CMM, influenced the construction of the Cupertino Community Dialogue Project. If several different resources inform one's practice, how does one determine what outcomes are due to CMM or another practical theory? When can we say that CMM made the difference as opposed to another resource?

Second, it becomes difficult to determine under what conditions CMM as a practical theory is not useful or does not make people's lives better given that stories of CMM not producing desired results in therapeutic and consulting cases go unreported. Practitioners rarely, if ever, indicate when CMM was not useful in their inquiry or highlight CMM's limitations when working with clients. If practical theory can make people's lives better, then it also possible that practical

theory can make people's live worse. Missing in current CMM research are examples of when a CMM-inspired interpretation or intervention did not work, or unintentionally led to undesirable consequences. This may be an artifact of the writing process in that books and journal articles tend to focus on success stories versus failures. But it does raise the specter of practical theory's equivalent of scientific theory's falsifiability principle (Popper, 1959). Under what conditions can a practical theory be shown to not make lives better?

Ethics

If a practical theory is judged by its ability to make social worlds better, issues regarding ethics move center stage as it becomes necessary to determine what counts as an ethical outcome and what constitutes a moral process by which we can create such outcomes. In one of the few essays to discuss how CMM approaches ethics, Cronen (1991) argues that a social theory that takes ethics seriously must be able to represent and describe patterns of practice. Cronen's (1991) analysis of CMM's approach to ethics highlights several key assumptions:

1. Communication entails a reflexive relationship between structure and action.
2. Moral orders can be represented by examining a hierarchy of narratives.
3. Moral orders emerge as aspects of communication.
4. Communication is the process by which systems are elaborated and that creates the ability to transform them.
5. Diversity is essential to elaboration and transformation.

From a CMM perspective, persons are the dense loci of structures of meaning; they are at the intersection of multiple moral orders that create a set of obligations, prohibitions, and permissions for the way they make meaning and take action. Our forms of communication not only create and sustain moral orders, they also provide the resources for liberation as new forms of communication enable persons to elaborate and transform existing moral orders.

At the heart of CMM is the idea that an ethically informative analysis must be rooted in the rich particulars of situations to allow individuals to rationally argue and compare moral issues (Cronen, 1991, p. 44). One way to evaluate CMM's ethical basis as a practical theory is to: (a) assess its ability to generate rich detailed descriptions of situations, and (b) create a variety of descriptions regarding the moral orders of a situation. It is not enough to simply generate a single detailed description of a situation; multiple descriptions must be generated if members of a human system are going to compare alternatives. Moreover, by fostering multiple descriptions of situations, the diversity of narratives to describe a situation is enhanced which keeps alive the resources for elaboration and transformation.

In the community of professional inquirers such as therapists, consultants, and academics, one can see this set of ethical commitments play out in practice. All practitioners try to create systemic hypotheses, stories about the system-in-view that allow them to account for the unique particulars of situations. Practitioners in the therapeutic and consultancy communities typically create multiple descriptions of situations to inform their practice using CMM concepts such as the hierarchy of meaning (Lewis, 1993), strange loops (Oliver, 1996), or stories lived and

told (Lang & McAdam, 1995). By creating multiple stories about clients and their situations, therapists and consultants are more likely to connect with their clients' grammar because they have explored several possible alternative grammars clients may use to make sense of their lived experience. Similarly, academic practitioners tend to use research protocols that emphasize case studies because they involve "the polyphonic and polysemous quality of the stories told…it takes the historicity of the case into account, pays attention the nuances of the observed phenomenon, calls attention to the multiple perspectives of the interpretation, and accounts for the recursive features of the case that the process of communication generates" (Chen & Pearce, 1995, p. 149). Simply, the multiple voices constituting situations are more readily kept alive using a case study methodology.

CMM has provided a rich set of tools for describing the moral orders of others and setting up the space for rational discourse or dialogue about differing moral orders. What is less clear is what ethical principles or ideas CMM maintains that practitioners should follow when engaging with others. Simply, what resources (read professional life narratives) does CMM provide a practitioner for making ethical choices during consultation with others?[1] This has traditionally been an important question for therapists and consultants who work with clients on a regular basis, but has increasingly become important for academic practitioners to address as they use more participatory and collaborative research designs. The rising use of participatory and collaborative forms of action research by academic practitioners necessitates examining the ethical positions that they create during interaction with others. For example, take a relatively simple process such as the research interview, in the form of either one-on-one interviews (Jia, 2001) or focus groups (Spano, 2001), that CMM academic practitioners commonly employ to inquire into the grammar of others. As Cronen (1995) observes, "When…I conduct an interview based on CMM, we bring to the situation certain grammatical abilities attained by the study of it including a technique adapted for CMM, 'circular questioning'" (p. 234). Interviews are not morally neutral as the way a practitioner asks questions and offers reflections shapes the moral positions that people may adopt during and after the interview. What advice does CMM offer practitioners for how to structure their inquiry?

Perhaps the closest articulation of the notion of ethics from a first-person practitioner perspective comes from Pearce's work on the temperaments of practical theorists (Pearce, 1993; Pearce & Pearce, 2001). Pearce (1993) observed that practical theorists function "as participants in a social world that is conceptualized as pluralistic" (p. 71). As a result, Pearce and Pearce (2001) suggests that practical theorists: (1) are committed to a continuing engagement in multiple conversations, (2) value the interests of the participants as much as their own, and (3) are devoted to developing principles and models that enable participations, practitioners, and theorists to act in this and other situations effectively. The criteria suggest that moral positioning is a tensional activity where practitioners manage the tension between the interests of themselves and their clients and stability and change—whether to maintain certain elements within the system or whether to elaborate or transform them.

This raises an interesting question, "What are the interests of a practitioner who is vested in

CMM?" Several possibilities exist that have been mentioned in the literature such as forward movement (Cronen & Lang, 1994), enhanced coordination (Pearce, 1976), liberation (Cronen, Chen, & Pearce, 1988), and diversity (Cronen, 1991) as well as several not mentioned specifically by CMM theory but that would seem to resonate with CMM's commitments such as freedom, responsibility, justice, and empowerment. What is needed is further work that begins to identify the various ethical positions and choices that CMM practitioners can create and make when working with human systems. Such research must not oversimplify the role that ethics plays in CMM practice by identifying the "rules" of ethical practice. Rather, what I am suggesting is that we need to explore ethics more in terms of phronesis or practical wisdom. Such exploration does require us to begin to identify the sensitizing principles that inform CMM's approach to ethics, but is equally interested in exploring how the principles and particulars of localized situations co-evolve with one another. This is similar to Barge and Oliver's (2003) argument that any approach toward inquiring into human systems must not collapse the spirit of the approach (i.e., sensitizing principles) and technique to create a formalized list of approved practices.

Implications for Practical Theorizing

The community of practitioners who have used CMM as a practical theory have produced an impressive array of research that demonstrates CMM's utility to a wide range of issues that challenge coordination within human systems in a diverse set of contexts. The emergent practice of CMM as a practical theory suggests three areas that warrant further attention: (1) exploring the full reflexive power between 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 as it relates to the grammar of practice engaged by therapists, consultants, and academics. Let me offer two suggestions for how these different concerns may be addressed in our future work.

Theoretical outreach

As I have attended several workshops involving CMM over the last few years, I increasingly hear the question being asked, "What's new in CMM theory?" When people ask this question, they are not saying CMM lacks utility or that it's basic ideas are not helpful in their practice. Rather, there is a profound sense of curiosity about how CMM's thinking is developing and what new ideas, concepts, and practices are on its theoretical horizons. If CMM is to continue to grow as a practical theory, CMM practitioners need to focus on showing how practice enriches CMM theory and to continue connecting it with other relevant social theories. Strategies for the former will be addressed in the following section on how to write up our research reports, so I will limit the present discussion to how other social theories can be connected to CMM. In light of the evidence that suggests practical theory grows just as readily from exploring grammars of practices and theory, it would be useful to broaden CMM's theoretical horizons and connect it with other theories that emphasize the importance of systems, meaning, and action. To be sure, connections between CMM and philosophical treatments on language such as Wittgenstein

(1953) and Dewey (1938) have been made. What I am calling for is a connection with social theories within a particular domain of practice versus more generalized treatments about language and systems. Let me highlight my argument by drawing on three theories from my home field of study, organizational communication, that may pose new questions and ideas for CMM: (1) complexity theory, (2) sense making theory, and (3) narrative theory.

Let me suggest three research areas that have emerged in the last few years that might elaborate CMM as a practical theory. These research areas are selected because like CMM they emphasize the notion of rules, grammars, and stories and emphasize the importance of looking at human organizations systemically. First, CMM could be connected with recent developments in systems theory such as complexity theory. Complexity theory suggests that living systems exist at the edge of chaos, meaning that the rules that are in use are moderately connected with one another (Stacey, 2001). Moreover, complexity theory suggests that rules may continually evolve and involve a process of ramping, when rules that are infrequently used or used by only a small number of individuals within the human systems, ramp up over time and subvert the dominant system of rules. Complexity theory could open up questions in CMM about how certain forms of communication keep a human system poised at the edge of chaos and how certain rule structures emerge within a human system over time.

Second, CMM would profit from being better connected to the sensemaking literature. For example, Weick's (1979, 1995) work on enactment, selection, and retention could be used to explore how rules meaning and action emerge and change over time within human systems. Weick's work on collective mind (Weick & Roberts, 1993) and improvisation (Weick, 1993) could also provide insight into the relationships between rule structures and the ability to manage the tension between fixed and emergent language games. In human systems how does one strike a balance between the fixed/routine and emergent/improvisational elements of practice to enable continuity and coherence?

Third, CMM could be connected with recent developments in narrative theory. For example, Boje's (2001) antennarrative theory provides a variety of creative methods for exploring different narratives within human systems. Boje (2001, also see Barge, in press) contends that human experience is plural which means the multiple stories can be told about any situation. The task then becomes how individuals read situations in a plural way. He highlights a number of techniques that may be useful to explore the different kinds of stories that can be creating including deconstruction, grand narrative, microstoria, story network, intertextuality, causality, plot, and theme analysis. These different methods may augment the existing diagnostic-descriptive tools that practitioners using CMM can employ as they work with others.

Rethinking Research Reports
If we are to get a better grasp on the ways that grammars of practice elaborate practical theory, under what conditions CMM is helpful, and the ethics of CMM practice, then our research reports need to do a better job of reporting this kind of information. First, practical theorists need to clarify why they have selected CMM to engage a specific situation or issue. The normal

argument for most CMM practitioners is the need to take a communication perspective toward a particular phenomenon such as mediation, intercultural communication, or leadership. But with the emergence over the last 30 years of a variety of theories emphasizing social construction, what is the unique niche for CMM? Why would one want to use CMM as opposed to another practical theory within the social constructionist family? For example, why would one want to use CMM when approaching a situation as opposed to Shotter's (1993) relationally-responsive approach to communication and his Wittgensteinian methods? Why would one want to use CMM to explain the social construction of situation as opposed to Harré and Van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory? Answering these questions requires CMM-influenced practitioners to better articulate the good reasons and benefits for choosing CMM as opposed to other practical theories to engage others and analyze situations.

Second, the methods and analysis sections need to describe the choices that practitioners make, the ethical implications of these choices, and whether these choices led to desirable outcomes. In many ways this is similar to qualitative research that employs reflexive interpretation (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000), where the author works the reader through the differing interpretations that were possible regarding a particular text and the process that was used to settle on the final interpretation offered in the research report. We need practitioners to articulate the ethical choices they make regarding how they position themselves in relation to the client or research participant. As Cronen and Chetro-Szivos (2001) point out, it is important to incorporate the role of the inquirer when interacting with others in one's research reports. As practitioners begin to articulate their relationship to the situation and its participants, we can begin to gain a better understanding of the ethical choices associated with the narratives of being a CMM practitioner and the ways that practitioners manage tensions among competing choices and positions.

During the course of practical theorizing, certain interpretations will be used and others will be discarded. Research reports need to include a description of the evolution of practice within a situation and note when CMM-inspired interpretations and interventions worked and when they didn't. Similar to the notion of resistance readings, a linguistic tool that allows one to chart moments of resistance within a text (Derrida, 1982), we can give attention in our research reports to moments when CMM inspired-interventions and practices do not fit the emerging situation, indicating problems with the practical theory's utility.

Third, the discussion section needs to highlight how the research elaborates, challenges, or extends existing CMM formulations. The discussion needs to do more than describe how the use of CMM as a practical theory has changed the situation, it must also address how the particular research has changed our understanding of CMM. In most academic articles, the discussion is concerned with addressing how the case study extends theory while in more "practitioner" articles, the conclusion is concerned with showing how the case has elaborated practice. What we need are discussions that do both, that show how practical theory as well as the grammar of practice has been elaborated.

Conclusion

In his discussion of CMM, Griffin (2003) points out that the CMM theorists tend to use poetic and figurative language when describing CMM and their research. The beauty of poetic and figurative language is that it is open to many interpretations. Certainly, this essay has identified one way to interpret CMM's use as a practical theory, but there is a feeling that alternative stories could be told about how CMM has been used as a practical theory, some of which would be at odds with the interpretation that has been offered in this paper. However, similar to evaluating practical theory on the basis of its utility versus truthfulness, my hope is that this essay will be a useful tool for helping to frame future conversations about CMM in terms of its reflexivity, utility, and ethics.

Notes

[1]In many of the essays, particularly those written by therapists and practitioners, practitioners detail how they made choices about creating moral positions in conversation. However, most if not all of these essays, are written by individuals who are members of a systemic community of practice. I read such essays as using CMM as a practical theory within the context of a larger systemic framework, which means the ethical choices, are guided mainly by systemic practice and, to a lesser degree, CMM. The issue that needs to be addressed is what constitutes the unique grammar of practice for CMM practitioners and its associated ethical commitments.

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