

A Conversation about Communication Ethics with Julia T. Wood

How did you become interested in studying communication ethics?

I think my interest in ethics really came about before I labeled it as that. Early in my career, in the 1980s, some issues of gender in communication, specifically power differences between women and men, were quite extraordinary. I think they have waned a bit in the years since but they were quite extraordinary in the early 1980s. I became interested in how communication really establishes power, and then more generally, got interested in how power is used to create categories for people in groups within a society and used to decide whose voices are heard and whose are not. My general interest in power has, in many ways, gone in some specific directions that people probably associate with my work. Power was perhaps the dominant issue that got my initial attention. The way that power leads to positions and understandings about how the world works that are indeed quite partial and sometimes quite perverse, because they aren't informed about the range of voices and the perspectives of those voices.

My work is probably more in the interpersonal domain. That's simply my background and training so I gravitated toward that initially. At the same time I would say that it's not absolutely restricted to that. For instance, I'm very interested in what happens with groups that are economically poor, often communities of color that are faced with toxic landfills and dumps and so forth in their communities. The sets of regulations about public hearings often exclude them because their voices are non-expert or scientific, and the hearings are often held at times when they can't attend. That kind of issue interests me, as do some of the things happening within social movements. I think interpersonal communication is a clear focus of mine, but it can't stay just there.

Do you prefer the term "communication ethic" or "communication ethics"?

I have a lot of reservation about the term "communication ethic" or, even worse, *the* communication ethic. To me that implies a single ethic for communication. If we recognize only one ethic, there is a very strong inclination toward some universal applications and judgments that are not really informed by a range of people in their practices. One way I can qualify that is to say I think I could be comfortable with perhaps a short list of quite abstract ethics of communication as long as each of those allowed for some

variations as to how it is applied in a given case. Ethics can be situated in particular people and groups and situations and cultures and historic locations. Now for instance, maybe we could agree to an ethic that called on us to communicate respectfully with others, but what constitutes “respectful” communication would be quite different in low context and high context cultures. So a communication ethic would be very abstract, perhaps on a level of form, but the content of what respectful communication would be would vary.

I was just thinking of something Josina Makau and Ron Arnett said in the preface of their book *Communication Ethics in an Age of Diversity*. They noted that communication can’t ever be understood in a vacuum because it’s shaped by so many forces that are social, political, economic, and historic. That’s really, in many ways, the basis of my reservation about a universalist ethic. I tend to think more about ethics of communication and ones that are rather flexible and applied as opposed to being formulaically thought through.

One of the other sorts of issues involved in this question of how we define and approach communication ethics is how we differentiate communication ethics from, say, philosophical views of ethics and philosophical scholarship. It seems to me that one of the real gifts of the communication field is a continuous and insistent emphasis on praxis as differentiated from abstract ethical rules. Perhaps because we are richly informed by rhetorical traditions, our questions circulate around, “How does this work in a given case? How do we apply it?” Philosophical ethics, at least as I studied them, are in many ways easier to deal with than applied ethics. Who would not agree with the idea of a “veil of ignorance”? Who would not agree with an ethic based on what’s better for the majority of people? It’s when you get down to the given case that the ease of philosophic abstraction sort of dissipates in front of you. It’s not that simple and not that clear-cut. A given situation is fraught with all kinds of constraints that are particular to the situation that are not part of the abstract consideration of an appropriate ethic.

My approach to communication ethics is practical and I think there are some criteria that guide me. “Ethical” to me seems to be inclusive of a range of voices and experiences and perspectives. So that to me is always a key issue. Am I behaving ethically or do I judge this to be an unethical kind of a pronouncement or policy? Ethics is informed by multiple voices. So that’s clearly part of it. I guess the key is to have equity and respect.

One of my former doctoral students is a man named Tim Muehlhoff. He and I have worked a great deal, not so much in writing as in conversation with each other, on this notion of trying to understand—not just meet the other, but to really understand—where the other is coming from. If you can find out what are the assumptions that inform, say, President Bush’s policies, or the viewpoints of someone who sets up and manages a hate site on the web; if you can understand those, then you ask, “If I believed what that person did, then would I believe what else follows from this person?” I think that it’s, to me, a very uncomfortable thing to say, “Ok, now. Let’s see if I endorse this assumption that someone who engages in hate speech and hate acts does.” To even temporarily put myself in that position is exquisitely uncomfortable. Yet, if I’m to really try to meet that other person, it means meeting them in that fullness, which is not, of course, the same as agreeing with them. I think we have to have some understanding that people’s actions and communication practices do not emerge out of nowhere. They are always very rooted.

In a recent study, “Monsters and Victims” in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, I did follow-up on some work on my earlier research on intimate partner violence. In the earlier study, I interviewed women who had been victims of intimate partner violence to learn about their perspectives. That’s pretty much the way the research has gone. You interview women victims and you castigate the terrible men that would do these things. I didn’t see anything in the research that really looked at intimate partner violence from the perspective of perpetrators who are predominately men. I asked, “What is it that they believe? How do they do this? How do they see what they are doing?” The joke around my house is that I spent the summer in prison, and indeed that is what I did. I went to a prison to interview men who had harmed or sometimes killed wives or girlfriends. It was the most difficult research I’ve ever done, because I was really trying to understand how it could make sense to them and be right in their minds in some way. It was difficult, not only as a human being but as a steadfast feminist, to listen to these men. I think what really troubled me most was when I came to a point in the research where I did understand them. Where I could see that their violence toward women in their lives made sense from their perspective. I was enough in their perspective to understand it. That is just a shocking moment for a person whose most violent act is to kick a door when I’m really angry, but I could understand it.

One of the men I talked to had viciously beaten a woman and later murdered her. As we talked, I found out that when he was five years old on the playground with his older brother who was his hero, one of his other brothers had come by and shot the brother that was his hero. Now what would I think of violence if at five years old I'd seen one of my brothers against another brother? That perspective begins to make sense—it's the way that he dealt with things and, for him, it was natural as breathing air.

I behave in the ways that I was brought up to behave, in many respects. I was always taught violence isn't how we solve problems. We don't hit people; we don't do these things. But the man I interviewed was also behaving according to what he was taught. Now I don't think we stay in this "everything is relative" morass. I think intimate partner violence is absolutely unacceptable, and I can't say that his actions were right. But I can say that they are understandable given the experiences and narratives that framed his life. They make sense. That gives us some real ideas for interventions. Of course, the really effective interventions in a situation like that may not be for that man. We are talking about very early childhood, very massive kinds of work. It means that society has to sign on to it.

What are your thoughts about communication ethics and the historical shift to postmodernity?

I think the postmodernist viewpoint that has emerged rejects decisively the idea of coherent autonomous identities and the idea of grand narratives for societies. In place of those modern forms, postmodernism offers us a view of multiple fluid sorts of selves and societies and spheres that are contingent, always arguable, as are actions within them. Now I think that is really helpful in breaking us away from some of the modernist universals, which of course were false universals because they were definitely from a quite particular standpoint. I think postmodernism has been helpful in breaking us away from that.

Yet at its extremes, particularly in its earlier parts, maybe a decade or 15 years ago, as postmodernism was emerging, it invited an epistemology of really radical and unstable subjectivity, which allows no basis for making judgments that some practices are better than others. Now I think that's been tempered a good deal and I think that's very good news indeed. I appreciate the de-centering inclinations of postmodernism very much. I think they were

important. I think they are benefiting from some tempering these days. I'm not convinced that individuals in cultures are so completely fragmented.

I'm dubious of the idea that we cannot create some sort of grand narratives that can be more inclusive than those of the past. In other words, the critique of grand narratives may be to a large extent the particular grand narratives that gained sway and not necessarily of the idea that we could have some quite broad narratives. Then, with that, I share the viewpoints of people such as you and Josina Makau and Ron Arnett that ethical communication these days has got to heed the postmodernist challenges to purely abstract universalism which ignores or devalues the local. There's got to be some kind of coming together. The temptation to reject any and all collective identities in favor of specific group identifications fosters even more social fragmentation than we have today. I don't think that we can go there. That's one reason for the cultural wars today that are breaking out all over. While many folks tend to see what separates them from others, more than noticing what connects them to others; it's always both. Yes, we are different. Yes, we are similar. I think that there are some things from modernity that we need not throw out in terms of some broad collective notions and narratives and beliefs. We need to somehow reconcile those with the idea that there are also very localized beliefs and variations on whatever our broad narratives are, but it's not either-or.

Universals were never 'universal'—they were simply a particular perspective or vision.

Or visions of members of a privileged group, let's say—mistaking the viewpoint that is cultivated by membership in that group and that serves the interests of that group as everybody's viewpoint. It's what I think Donna Haraway refers to as “the god trick,” little “g” god. The god trick is saying, “I'm the voice and the perspective from everywhere and nowhere in particular,” but of course, it is from a particular place. When you think about how the laws were made in this nation, they were from the perspective of white, able-bodied, more or less Christian—at least in theory if not always in practice—property-owning males. That's not the viewpoint of everyone. One of the great exposés of that, if you will in a particular form, is Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States*. You read that book and you say, “Oh!” The history someone of my generation learned in grade school and college was from a particular viewpoint, and guess what—there were some other

viewpoints there that wouldn't have called it the same way. That's what I mean. Whenever you have dominant groups that can make their views seem to be the normal, the right, the natural ones.

I think I knew that in some way, but I couldn't quite label it. Therefore, of course, I couldn't conceive it and think about it in any serious way until I began reading and working with standpoint theory, which is really what I credit with giving me that insight and helping me extend it. Standpoint theory addresses how our perspectives are shaped by the social, symbolic, and material conditions of our life and not our lives as individuals. For instance in our case, being white women, or white heterosexual women, or white heterosexual middle class women, shapes how we understand the world. Now I see that is not truth in the sense that it's not the only way to understand the world. Then, of course, standpoint has led me to see more and more particular views have been privileged as right.

One of the more interesting angles within this is Shirley and Edwin Ardener's muted group theory of speech. Anthropologists were initially trying to understand cultures and they were talking to only the men in the cultures, because they basically thought the men were more interesting. When they finally began talking to women, they discovered a whole other realm of what the cultural life is about, through the practices and everyday activities of the women. Women understood and participated in the culture in ways that were not only not understood by men but also not in any way encoded in the language that the men created.

Given that a "universal" is politically based, would a universalist communication ethic be impossible?

Not "impossible;" that's not the right word. Going back to the beginning of our conversation, I'm not sure you could have a universalist ethic like, what counts as "respect."

Given existing power relations, it's almost inevitable that some cultures and groups will dominate while shaping the discourse, while others are going to be marginalized. Back in the early 1990s when I was inquiring into "care" and how care is defined in a culture, it became very clear that men, and, more accurately, masculine perspectives, defined care and caregivers in Western culture. This has extraordinary implications, both benefits and burdens, for women who were defined as caregivers. It still does, for that matter.

So, communication ethics depends on how one defines the parameters of ethics within the relationship as it's negotiated between people who are situated in and understand the world differently?

That's right. In a relationship—for example a romantic relationship, a professional relationship, collegial relationship, or people who write together—there's supposed to be some significant understanding of each other's perspectives and an honoring of that. The minute one says "It's my book and I'll tell you what to do with it," or "It's my marriage and I'll tell you the rules of it," the minute it's that way, you have something less than an ethical relationship. To violate ethical principles of inclusion and equity is to do violence to the relationship, and to both parties. It's obvious that you do violence to the party who's being silenced or in other ways oppressed. I think we also do it to ourselves when we oppress.

In your research with men in prison, did any of them recognize that they had done violence to themselves by oppressing their partners?

Some of them did. I wound up titling the piece "Monsters and Victims: Male Felons' Accounts of Intimate Partner Violence"—which is not an aside; it's really directly relevant to your question. I entered the study knowing these men were absolute monsters. They weren't worthy of human attention or consideration. Part of the learning experience of the research for me was that I could understand that they were also equally victims of their own violence and what it did to them. Some of them lost women who were deeply important to them. Another thing I didn't believe before the study was that men actually deeply loved some of the women they hurt and killed. Before the study I would have said you can't deliberately hurt somebody you love. I was persuaded differently, because many of the men had also been victims of being on the lowest rung of a society with no way out. They were being told "here are the ideals of manhood" and yet they had no way to meet those ideals. It was not so nice and clear-cut. You can't say they're either monsters or victims. They are both.

Some of them did know they had hurt themselves. Mainly, they didn't know of options. What's another way to be in the world? A lot of the men came from a standpoint that didn't necessarily assume one did or should respect others. The idea was that you beat them up before they beat you up. So, we're back to one of my frames for looking at the world. The values you

and I would talk about for “respect” aren’t necessarily present in some people’s viewpoints.

What is the role of an educator for instilling communicative ethics?

I think one of the fundamental responsibilities all educators have, particularly people in communication, is teaching our students to participate effectively and ethically in a world that is characterized by diversity. One of the key terms in our field is “perspective,” but so far it’s been applied largely to inappropriate situations. “Perspective” is broader than that and includes perspective-taking, teaching people to deeply take perspectives. I’m not just talking about role-taking, but I mean to really ask questions like “What would it be like to see one of my brothers shoot my other brother when I was five years old?” Really try to move into that. Read the whole narrative from the man who gave me the story, and read his entire interview, and sit in his place, his mind, his world for a while.

I think that a lot of efforts to teach about diversity and different viewpoints and all have been in many ways somewhat shallow and have tended to be satisfied with group generalizations. We’ll say this about “black speech,” and this about “women’s speech.” I think we need those generalizations, but you also need to understand that within any group perspective, there are also variations, and then we can begin to understand. Some men have seen one brother shoot another and not become violent. Now what’s the difference? It becomes very complex. I don’t think we can necessarily get there in all cases. I think it is worthwhile to try to hold ourselves to that as an ideal ethic and ask our students to do the same.

One of the most influential essays I’ve ever read was Linda Alcoff’s “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” In that essay she asks, “When do we have a right to speak for others? When don’t we?” It’s such a smart essay because she didn’t lay it out as “here’s the five rules,” or the guidelines or one principle. What she ended up developing was a set of interrogatories that a person should ask himself/herself before choosing to speak for others. Asking them, working through them, may help you decide that you shouldn’t or you should, or you could, or you must. In different cases, you might come to different decisions. It’s like rhetoric. There are no absolutes, but there are interrogatories. There are ways of deliberating about appropriate courses of action. Educators can recommend a process that may be productive, but you can’t always guarantee a result from a student. There are some processes that

are likely to lead to ethical communication. A process somehow requires us to look at perspectives other than our own. It's more likely to lead to decisions that yield good practices, rather than a process that doesn't require us to do that. The process helps us understand more who we are, who others are, what the situation is. It is much, much messier than having the abstract, "the greatest good for the greatest number." I think, from my viewpoint, it's better. I think it is richer.

Clearly, I'll be able to understand some perspectives more than others. I'll never be able to understand the black or gay perspective as fully as I do a white or heterosexual perspective, but I can do more than say, "I'm not black, I'm not gay. So I don't understand it at all." That's a cop-out, too. If I can understand to some degree those different perspectives, then not only are people likely to think in ways that are more informed by multiple perspectives, and I think this is so fundamentally important, I'm also consistently disproving that the way I see the world as the way the world is. I'm always asking, "How could this person be seeing the world? How exactly do I deal with that assumption?" Where would I be if I could no longer hold onto the illusion that my viewpoint is *the* viewpoint?

Technology is training us to be so much more passive. When we talk about the interactive games and activities, and so forth. They're within a structure that's set for us. We don't have to go outside. We're within a set structure, which is in itself passivity. Then we can't get out of the structure because we've given up the right to question or to imagine an alternative.

For his thesis project, Tim Muehlhoff conducted a study with a group of born-again Christians and gays and lesbians who are in a cultural war with each other, inviting them to imagine an alternative. He led them to create their own narrative and explain the things that they considered as basic in that narrative. In really trying to understand that, and keep walking in those words, they had a couple of breakthroughs that go beyond empathy and paraphrasing. They talked about understanding what it means to live in a world. He's actually teaching his students ways to walk in the words of another, and in a way, enter a perspective in a way that you can't really enter without knowing another's language. Knowing the perspective of the other is necessary to interacting with them ethically. All the skills in the world won't help us if we don't have that richer understanding within perspectives.

In addressing themes in your scholarship, you've mentioned several writers. Are there others who have influenced your work in communication ethics?

My thinking has been shaped by a number of writers who use critical lenses to examine families—who counts as a family, who takes responsibility for family life and well-being. An early influence was Susan Moller Okin's book, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, which critiqued normative beliefs and practices that assume women have primary or exclusive responsibility for home and family. One of Okin's arguments with which I particularly resonate is that the family not only operates in more or less ethical ways, but also that it teaches ethical frameworks to its youngest members, children. In other words—ethical principles are *learned* and one of the key sites for learning them is the family. Okin makes the point that if children see parents operating in inequitable ways—for example, mothers doing most or all of the work required to keep home and family functioning—then children are likely to regard gender inequity as acceptable, as ethical. Nel Noddings makes a similar argument about the importance of teaching all children to care and to take responsibility for the caregiving that is required for families and society to work.

A more recent book, *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, edited by Wendy Brown and Janet Halley, includes a number of very powerful analyses of laws and social policies that confer various privileges and rights on socially approved familial forms—marriage, to be precise—and withhold those privileges and rights from other familial units such as gay and lesbian families. In my judgment, there are keen ethical questions to be asked about cultural structures and practices that restrict to only certain people those things that are required for any of us to live a good life—basic health care, the right to insure loved ones, equity among family members in responsibilities for family well-being, and so forth.

Because I am very interested in how people's lives are regulated, I'm naturally drawn to Michel Foucault's work. He offers incisive analyses of a multitude of ways in which families and the lives they can live are regulated. What particularly intrigues me about Foucault's analyses of power is that he attends to two types, or levels, of power that regulate human rights, actions, and so forth. He gives good consideration to centralized forms of power such as laws that institutionalize rights and prerogatives. Yet Foucault doesn't stop there. He also attends to decentralized forms of power such as social norms and expectations. He brings a keen eye to the ways in which these

decentralized forms of power shape—discipline, to use one of Foucault’s favored terms—everyday life, including our understandings of who counts as a family and what rights and privileges should be conferred on various associations such as gay partnerships, single parents, and so forth. In highlighting the importance of disbursed, decentralized forms of power, Foucault provides an opening for thinking about some of the non-dramatic ethical choices—routine, everyday ones—that we make in our roles as agents in the social world.

I might tell students—it might sound like I’m saying this because you co-authored this book but I’m quite serious—to start with *Dialogic Civility*. It’s eloquent and extended. Be with others in a common sense world and respect them—even, and perhaps particularly, when their perspective differs from our own. That book starts with the idea of perspective taking and engages in it across contexts—everything from policy and social movements to interpersonal relations to organizational communication. Framing something—a situation, event, choice, or other phenomenon—in one particular way and rigidly viewing it only in that way inhibits students from taking the perspective of another. That’s the bottom line whether we’re teaching public speaking, group communication, or interpersonal relationships. Whatever we’re teaching, perspective taking has got to be a part of it.

What is the biggest challenge for communication ethics in a time of postmodernity?

Postmodernity recognizes the multiplicity of both selves and the social world. It proclaims that there is no unwavering center and certainly no unassailable “True Perspective.” Given this, it is more important than ever that we all learn to take multiple perspectives—to see from a range of viewpoints. It’s what María Lugones, in a delightful word choice, calls “world traveling”—learning to cross from one way of seeing the world to a different one, and then another different one, and another. Doing this enlarges our own understandings by making them multiple, complex, and usefully unsettled.

Another danger of postmodern conceptions of self and the social world is nihilism, the denial of any absolute basis of meaning. If identities, values, ethical principles are all radically subjective, there can be no clear or stable basis for judgment that some beliefs, codes of ethics, practices, and so forth are better than others. One hope for resisting such radical relativism is to turn

to rhetorical theory, which offers rich advisories about making practical judgments in an inherently contingent world. Rhetorical theories don't rely—at least not primarily—on absolute and *a priori* principles or criteria for making judgments. Instead, they encourage us to consider the specific circumstances, people, and options available in the given case and to work to make sound judgments about attitudes and actions—not absolute judgments, not judgments that are beyond question or argument, and not the only possible judgments, but sound ones that are cognizant of the particularities of the given case. This way of acting in the world doesn't give us the comfort of believing we've found the unalterably, undeniably “correct” judgment. Yet, if there is no capital-T truth, then such comfort would be false because it would be based on a misunderstanding of ourselves and the world in which we live. It is no small challenge to learn how to live and act in a world and with selves that are more shifting than those we previously believed in.

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