

A Pragmatist Conception of Creative Listening to Emotional Expressions in Dialogues Across Differences

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My topic is listening, which is usually defined as the act of hearing sounds or utterances attentively and, sometimes, allowing what we hear to persuade us to change our conduct. In a fuller sense, though, listening is about understanding what we hear and that requires properly interpreting not only sounds but also other sensory stimuli in the context within which they occur. On this occasion, I am primarily interested in listening to emotional expressions associated with personal identity. While I am interested in listening regarding dialogues across many differences in identity, such as culture, race, and ethnicity, I will concentrate on gender in the conclusion of my essay.

THE BASIS OF INTERPRETIVE LISTENING: A PRAGMATIST CONCEPTION OF SELECTIVE ATTENTION, CULTURAL CUSTOMS, AND PERSONAL HABITS

Listening is attentive hearing, and attention is always selective in what it recognizes. William James writes, “Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no *interest* for me. *My experience is what I agree to attend to.*”¹ Affective states associated with need, including desire and interest, influence selective attention; hence, they influence listening. To listen well in dialogues across difference, we must desire to live a life of expanding meaning and value, realize that we need others to do so, and cultivate an active interest in difference.

John Dewey recognizes that selective attention weaves precognitive determinations of value into our cognitive judgments: “To prefer *this* is to exclude *that*. Any liking is choice, unwittingly performed. There is no selection without rejection; interest and bias are selective, preferential. To take this for a good is to declare in act, though not at first in thought, that it is better than something else.”² Many of our prejudices reside far below the level of conscious awareness. Biases are not necessarily bad. Because we are finite beings in an infinitely complex world, it is necessary to have biases so that we may select out what most requires our attention. Likewise, it is valuable to have unreflective habits of action that allow us to respond quickly and intelligently to danger and opportunity. Nonetheless, these unconscious biases in interest and habit often possess us rather than us possessing them with reflective awareness, resulting in missed opportunities to truly listen.

Habits for the early pragmatists wove together cognition, emotion, and action. Charles Sanders Peirce observes, “Our beliefs guide our desires and shape our actions....The feeling of believing is a more or less sure indication of there being established in our nature some habit which will determine our actions.”³ For such pragmatists, a cognitive belief is an embodied habit evincing emotion that directs action toward stimuli, objects, ideas, and ideals. Learning, believing, and knowing have a definite biological grounding while mind is never separate from bodily needs,

desires, and interests. Beliefs provide the forestructure we need to interpret our world. If selective interests direct what we attend to when we hear, beliefs determine how we interpret it.

For Dewey, "All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will, they *are* will."⁴ Habits constitute the core of self-identity. We acquire our habits from our habitat, especially the norms and customs of our social habitat. For the most part, "individuals form their personal habits under conditions set by prior customs" (*HN*, 43). Initially, the customs of the culture in whose social practices we participate largely determines our personal identity. Different cultures and subcultures impart different habits, beliefs, and structures for interpreting the world. Members of different cultures acquire different patterns of selective attention and habitual response to the world. To some degree, they occupy different worlds.

Habits are the moment-to-moment working adaptation of personal capacities to our physical and social environment. To work well, they must have some measure of unconscious intellectual specialization and mechanical efficacy that "if unchecked ends in thoughtless action" (*HN*, 121). Dewey indicates, "Concrete habits do all the perceiving, recognizing, imagining, recalling, judging, conceiving and reasoning that is done.... Yet habit does not, of itself, know, for it does not of itself stop to think, observe or remember" (*HN*, 124). The beliefs and value judgments that provide the interpretive structures necessary for understanding are best formed as a consequence of conscious acts of deliberative inquiry. Dewey remarks, "Our deepest-seated habits are precisely those of which we have least awareness. When they operate in a situation to which they are not accustomed, in an unusual situation, a new adjustment is required" (*EN*, 235). Listening to others different from ourselves is one such "unusual situation" that requires "a new adjustment" of our habits of interpretation. Growth requires encountering unaccustomed situations, be they real or imagined.

It is important that habits come under our conscious control; otherwise, they possess us. That is why reflective listening and learning are so important. Many consider critical thinking a matter of technical skill involving culturally neutral rules of logic. For Deweyan pragmatists, though, there is no such thing as theory or value neutrality. All thinking, including critical thinking, involves the needs, desires, interests, and purposes of thinkers and their cultures. Because all thinking is biased, critical thinking, for all its undeniable usefulness, can still trap its users inside the limits of a given set of cultural customs and personal habits that inhibit their ability to listen to others who do not reflect in the same way they do. Dewey warns, "Habit is however more than a restriction of thought. Habits become negative limits because they are first positive agencies" (*HN*, 123). Traditional habits of critical thinking can provide many positive agencies, but the canons of correct critical thinking can also set negative limits. The truly critical thinker is the one who acquires the habit of reflective imagination by acquiring the habit of listening to others who think differently. Such a person truly understands the value of diversity to self-creation and growth.

Many things, including parents, peers, and popular media, seize us before we critically comprehend them. Dewey distinguishes “individual minds” from “individuals with minds” (*EN*, 169). Only the latter have minds of their own apart from the minds customarily found in their culture. “Individuals with minds” have passed through a process of cultural critique, personal reflection, and self-creation. If people are ever to possess “selves” and realize their own unique potential, they must analyze and reconstruct their cultural context. Technical skill in critical thinking enables cultural reflection, but, typically, it must limit itself to analyzing some already existing state of affairs. That is why the release of poetic imagination and possibility is frequently more important. Critical thinking as technique alone also tends to ignore the embodied and emotional component of thought and action. Furthermore, dialogue with those from cultures different from our own is an especially effective spur to cultural reflection, poetic imagination, and self-creation. It can bring growth through creative and critical thinking.

To listen, we must first attend to others and then interpret what we hear. Habits provide the requisite interpretive forestructure, though they have “negative limits” as well as “positive agencies.” By disrupting our habitual interpretive forestructure, it is possible for us to learn and grow beyond the limits of our already existing world. To understand another, we must be open to them. That means putting our habits of interpretation, explanation, and conduct at risk. Being embodied emotionally charged dispositions to act, habits of interpretation and response are often hard to break open, a fact that anyone who has struggled to lose weight, stop smoking, or the like, fully understands. Furthermore, because habits constitute the self, breaking a habit involves breaking one’s self-identity. That is the deepest reason dialogues across difference are as difficult as they are dangerous. Sometimes such dialogues simply cannot, or at least should not, occur. Nonetheless, not participating in dialogues across difference also entails grave dangers. Often where we find the greatest danger, there too we discover the greatest hope for wonder, amelioration, and creativity.

THE ART OF CREATING MEANING AND MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Emphasizing creativity allows us to recognize more readily the noncognitive dimensions of understanding, such as imagination, feeling, and perception. Once we understand the social construction of all meaning, we may begin to explore the creative possibilities of listening to differences.

Pragmatists commonly work out the contingent construction of meaning, truth, and value through consequences. They think we are creative participants in an unfinished universe, not idle spectators of a consummated cosmos. I prefer pluralistic pragmatists, such as James and Dewey, who think creation occurs whenever individuals, or aggregates of individuals called cultures, make connection. When creative connection displays a dynamic harmony in form, it is beautiful and good. While vicious ugliness is always a possible consequence of dangerous dialogues, so too is benevolent beauty.

A common misconception regarding listening assumes that the goal is to discover the abstract, decontextualized meaning of another’s speech act, utterance,

or sound, as the speaker intends it, and then to reproduce it in one's own mind. Actually, though, understanding meaning is a *constructive* process that occurs within a particular context, among specific participants, and that is, therefore, always open to reconstruction. Instead of striving to *recreate* the content of another's thought, feeling, or act, the task of communication is to *create* understanding among participants in the dialogue. "Meanings are rules for using and interpreting things," writes Dewey, "interpretation being always an imputation of potentiality for some consequence" (*EN*, 147). When two or more persons mutually agree on the potentiality for various consequences of some meaning co-intended between them, they creatively make meaning and come to mutual understanding, even if they do not agree about the truth or value of the consequences. Dialogues across differences contain extraordinary artistic and creative possibilities as well as dire hazards.

We should approach all dialogues artfully. Spoken or written language is sometimes too limited a mode for such communion. Dewey insists, "Expression strikes below the barriers that separate human beings from one another.... Art is the most universal form of language" (*EN*, 275). He further indicates, "Now art is the most effective mode of communication that exists.... Anything in the world, no matter how individual in its own existence is potentially common.... But it becomes a conscious common possession, or is shared, by means of works of art more than by any other means" (*EN*, 291). It is best to understand art in the ordinary sense of producing cultural artifacts. When we realize that all meanings, including the meanings of speech acts or other sounds, are sociocultural artifacts distinguished only by their differential ability to function as means to consequences, we find that artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation have universal import. All human beings rely on their artistic capacity to transform existence, including the actions of others in society. All meanings (moral, aesthetic, and cognitive) are artifacts, things created by making consequences common among communicants.

Personal identity is an artifact of the art of social construction. So we need to ask ourselves, how do we come to first possess and then recreate our selves? Part of the pragmatic answer is through self-eclipse:

The individual, the self, centered in a settled world which owns and sponsors it, and which in turn it owns and enjoys, is finished, closed. Surrender of what is possessed, disowning of what supports one in secure ease, is involved in all inquiry and discovery.... For to arrive at new truth and vision is to alter. The old self is put off and the new self is only forming, and the form it finally takes will depend upon the unforeseeable result of an adventure. No one discovers a new world without forsaking an old one.... Those who do not fare forth and take the risks attendant upon the formation of new objects and the growth of a new self, are subjected perforce to inevitable change of the settled and close world they have made their own. (*EN*, 188–189)

This statement is an explicit acknowledgment of the dangers involved for those open to creatively inquiring into their world, including listening sincerely to strangers in their social world. Openness inevitably involves risk and vulnerability, but sometimes only by putting elements of our present self at risk is it possible to survive, and perhaps even to grow.

Listening carefully to communicate well is a creative act. In *Art as Experience* Dewey declared, "Communication is the process of creating participation, of making common what had been isolated, singular; and part of the miracle it achieves is that, in being communicated, the conveyance of meaning gives body and definiteness to the experience of the one who utters as well as to that of those who listen."⁵ The art of communication involves embodied and emotional as well as cognitive communion, the result of which is reciprocal transformation. Because we mostly ignore it, I want to emphasize emotional communication in what follows.

Grasping the emotional meaning of words, shrieks, and sighs is as much a constructive process as comprehending cognitive meaning. Indeed, the two combine in any fully unified communicative act. Whatever the neurophysiological basis of emotional expression in the autonomic nervous system, the meaning of an emotional display remains a social construction. Similar remarks hold for our own personal experience of our emotional lives. We must learn the meaning of our acoustic gestures, including emotional gestures (for example, tone and timbre of voice, gnashing of teeth, grunts, and so on) from others through agreement over their consequences.

We tend to assume that we first possess our thoughts and emotions, and then we meaningfully express them. Actually, we must have a well-developed self before we can approximate possessing our thoughts and emotions, much less expressing them; then, self-possession depends on taking the attitude of others. Dewey's colleague, close friend, and fellow pragmatist George Herbert Mead worked out the idea of agents needing to take the attitude of the other in responding to their own stimuli as the necessary criterion of selfhood and personal identity.⁶ Mead thought individuals could not grasp the meaning of their own actions (such as gestures) except by taking the attitude of another in an emerging trans-action: "Insofar then as the individual takes the attitude of another toward himself, and in some sense arouses in himself the tendency to the action, which his conduct calls out in the other individual, he will have indicated to himself the meaning of the gesture."⁷ This is the idea of the looking-glass self. The vocal gesture is of special importance because "it reacts upon the individual who makes it in the same fashion that it reacts upon an other."⁸ The vocal gesture is not, however, strictly necessary since "any gesture by which the individual can himself be affected as others are affected, and which therefore tends to call out in him a response as it would call it out in another, will serve as a mechanism for the construction of a self."⁹ Acoustic examples of such gestures might include finger tapping, foot stomping, or hand clapping. For pragmatists like Mead and Dewey, we do not have a self until we take the attitude of others toward our own actions; thus, listening to others different from ourselves can alter our self-identity, which is why many refuse to do it. We always remain dependent on others for the very meaning of our acts. When others do not respond to us as we expect them to, we may quickly come to doubt whether we in fact possess the cognitive or emotional intentions we think we do.

Consider an infant crying.¹⁰ Initially, the baby is simply in an affective state accompanied by utterances and sounds the listener (such as a caregiver) may

interpret as an intentional emotional state that means hunger, sleepiness, or injury. Only later, when the infant learns others interpret its acts as having definite consequences, will the infant learn the meaning of its cries and come to possess intentional mental functions. Such learning continues for a lifetime. The meaning of any action (including any vocal gesture) is determined by the response of others coordinated with our own actions regarding some shared consequence. In a sense, we are all infants when we strive to listen and respond to those radically different from our selves.

LISTENING, THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF EMOTIONAL MEANING,
AND THE DANGERS OF BEING DISMISSED

This section examines the social construction of emotional meaning. Having stressed the creative possibilities of listening in dialogues across difference, here I identify some of the dangers of having our feelings dismissed when others refuse to listen or, worse, when they interpretatively redesignate the meaning of our intended emotional expressions at our expense.

To focus our attention, consider the following vignette of a dialogue across gender differences that I once witnessed. It involves a new female teacher and a male administrator who called a meeting in which he promised the faculty could say whatever they felt needed saying for the purposes of reforming departmental programs. The teacher felt the need to express sympathetic concern for students caught in a certain institutional bind that the teachers in the program could ameliorate if they were willing to do a bit more work with students in advance of the start of classes. After the meeting, the senior teachers in the affected program complained to the administrator, who then called the young teacher into his office and accused her of being uncollegial. Other teachers outside of the program construed her concern for the students as being thoughtful and considerate not only of the students, but of her colleagues as well. In my opinion, they were correct. Further, again in my opinion, the teachers who complained were merely defending their authority in the existing faculty hierarchy while avoiding their responsibility to the students. In scolding the new teacher, the administrator chose to defend the status quo and to annul his promise — a promise impossible to guarantee, in any case — that the meeting constituted a safe environment in which to express opinions. In conferring with the junior teacher later, she indicated to me that the administrator treated her paternalistically by acting condescending, dismissing her ideas along with her feelings of sympathy, and humiliating her by requiring she to apologize to the offended senior teachers. She maintained that he would not have addressed her or the situation in the same way had she been male. The vicissitudes of human intention are notorious; it is the stuff of comedy and tragedy. What really happened? It depends on who tells the story and how one interprets it — interpretation, of course, being dependent on the individual's culturally inculcated habits.

In her perceptive essay, "Being Dismissed," Sue Campbell provides an interesting interpretive framework that suggests the possibility of gender bias in the previous vignette.¹¹ In summing up her stance, Campbell makes three assertions that accord well with Dewey and Mead's theories of the creation of meaning and the self

outlined earlier. First, she finds that “expression of feeling has an important public role.” Second, the “articulation of significance is possible, and only possible, through the use of such socially acquired resources as language, acting, and gesture, and various feelings may involve all or any of these.” Finally, the “importance of locating the role of feelings as the attempt to articulate, form, or individuate a certain kind of *meaning* or *significance* is that such an account requires that our expressions of feeling be interpretable” (BD, 54). Making audible expressions of feeling interpretable to others requires both that the one wishing to express his or her emotions has “an adequate range of resources to make the significance of things clear” to others and that others provide “uptake” and properly interpret the signs proffered (BD, 54). For pragmatists, interpretation requires participants to come to agreement about potential consequences. Making our expressions interpretable to another involves taking their attitude toward our own verbal gestures and other bodily signs. The vicious irony is that those dismissed from certain conversations, I am thinking particularly about the discourses of power, may never have the chance to acquire the requisite range of resources necessary to make themselves clear. While hard to detect, this is perhaps the most vicious and effective form of oppressive power since it allows the excluded other to internalize images of their own incapacity.

Campbell poses the question of what happens when others refuse to provide “uptake” (recognition, acknowledgment, and the like) of someone’s emotions or when they redesignate them as something other than what was intended. In the preceding vignette, those in power dismissed the teacher’s intended emotions of care and compassion for students and redesignated them as arrogance and, in the words of the new teacher, bitchiness. In fact, being called a “crazy bitch” is Campbell’s first example of a woman’s emotion being dismissed and redesignated by the other participants in the trans-action.

Campbell concentrates on the emotions of anger (the one emotion usually forbidden women while regularly preserved as the only publicly allowed masculine emotion), bitterness (as the refusal to forgive and forget), and sentimentality. These emotions are frequently dismissed, though sometimes, as in the case of compassion, they are simply devalued as “virtues of femininity” that are vices in men.

Those who have the social power to refuse to listen to, to dismiss, or to interpretatively redesignate another’s emotional expression hold tremendous power. Indeed, the teacher in the previous example felt helpless to protest or to engage in further action because she believed it might endanger her employment. Since meaning is a social construction, such incidents may lead one to doubt his or her own intentions. Many learn helplessness from such experiences.

We must, as Campbell puts it, comprehend that “the power of interpreters to help determine the situation may render our intentions unrecoverable and opaque” even to ourselves (BD, 49). We cannot see ourselves directly; others, with their habits of interpretation, must serve, at first, as the mirrors into which we look to understand our own actions. When their attitude is dismissive, we may become

confused and begin to doubt our own thoughts and feelings. For instance, returning once again to the example of my fellow teacher, as she searched to better understand her situation, she expressed to me a concern that she was in fact being uncollegial. We must remember that all mirrors distort their object somewhat. In addition, we must learn to look as far inward as we do outward.

Even when we are confident of the emotion we intend to express acoustically and otherwise, how others interpret our gestures or utterances, or their refusal to even listen, may hold power over us. For example, Campbell indicates that combining “a certain mode of expression (recounting of injury) with a certain mode of response (failure to listen) forms bitterness” (*BD*, 51). Expanding on this theme, she observes that placing the responsibility to communicate on the one expressing the emotion allows recipients to evade their responsibility to recognize and respond to what the other is saying. The meanings constructed between speaker and hearer are deformed and lead to ugly consequences because they have been systematically distorted by the interests of oppressive power.

Campbell observes that those “no longer caring to listen” can call on various forms of socially accepted critiques that then become “a reason or excuse for not listening” to another’s expression. She supports this point with following observation by Audre Lorde: “I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white women says, ‘Tell me how you feel but don’t say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.’ But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?” (*BD*, 51). Here the social custom of speaking in a calm and congenial way becomes an excuse for not having to listen compassionately to the suffering of another. I have often seen expressions of suffering dismissed at academic conferences by the avatars of rational and critical thinking. Always insisting that others “reason” as you do makes it easy not to listen to those who think differently, just as always doubting what others are trying to say is one way of protecting one’s present identity.

The woman described in Lorde’s passage, who felt threatened by a message that could change her life (by bringing feelings of guilt and, perhaps, a call to ameliorative action), understands that being a recipient of a communication that challenges one’s habits of interpretation can alter one’s identity. Believe me, I know the uncomfortable feeling of guilt; engendered discourse habits are excruciatingly hard to break. Still, the better emotion is the desire to alter one’s conduct in the future by striving to build better relations today.

My essay has focused on listening in dialogues across difference with a gender example. However, Lorde’s comment shows how readily we may extend these remarks regarding the social construction of emotional meaning to any dialogue across difference that involves the culturally marginalized (whether racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, gays, or the disabled).

1. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (1890; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1950), 402.

2. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925), in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 320. This work will be cited as *EN* in the text for all subsequent references.
3. Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief" (1887), in *The Essential Peirce*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 114.
4. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 21. This work will be cited as *HN* in the text for all subsequent references.
5. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934), in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 248–249.
6. Here are two useful conditions agents must satisfy if they are to take the attitude of the other in coordinating trans-actions: (1) an individual's own gestures release in us social impulses that would otherwise be released only by stimuli from others, and (2) the responses or attitudes thus called forth by self-stimulation are of a sort that the type of gestures involved might normally elicit from others. See Gary A. Cook, *George Herbert Mead: The Making of a Social Pragmatist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 84.
7. George Herbert Mead, "A Behavioristic Account of the Significant Symbol" (1922), in *Selected Writings: George Herbert Mead*, ed. Andrew J. Reck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 244.
8. *Ibid.*, 243.
9. George Herbert Mead, "The Mechanism of Social Consciousness" (1912), in *Selected Writings: George Herbert Mead*, ed. Reck, 140.
10. I borrow this example from John Dewey, *Ethics*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 7, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 197–198.
11. Sue Campbell, "Being Dismissed: The Politics of Emotional Expression," *Hypatia* 9, no. 3 (1994): 46–65.