Contents

Introduction viii

PART I: Foundations and Framework

1. The Ethics of Being in a Communications Context 24
   Clifford G. Christians

2. The Moral Dimension of Communicating 46
   Antonio Pasquale

3. Discourse Ethics and Its Relevance for Communication and Media Ethics 68
   Edmund Arens

4. Universal Values and Moral Development Theories 87
   Deni Elliott

PART II: Protonorms Across Cultures

5. The Basic Norm of Truthfulness: Its Ethical Justification and Universality 87
   Dietmar Mieth
6. The Arab-Islamic Heritage in Communication Ethics
   Muhammad I. Ayish
   Haydar Badawi Sadig

7. Ethics and the Discourse on Ethics in
   Post-Colonial India
   Anantha Sudhaker Babu

8. Communication Ethics in a Latin American Context
   Gabriel Jaime Perez

9. Communalistic Societies: Community and
   Self-Respect as African Values
   Andrew Azukaegho Moemeka

10. Emergent Values From American Indian Discourse
    Cynthia-Lou Coleman

PART III: Applications

11. Communications, Hope, and Ethics
    Pedro Gilberto Gomes

12. Communication Ethics in a Changing Chinese Society: The Case of Taiwan
    Georgette Wang

13. Japanese-Style Communication in a New Global Age
    Hideo Takelchi

14. Vagaries of Time and Place: Media Ethics in Poland
    Karol Jakubowicz

15. Accepting the Other: On the Ethics of Intercultural Communication in Ethnographic Film
    Keyan G. Tomasselli
    Arnold Shappro

    Robin Andersen

Conclusion: An Ethics of Communication Worthy of Human Beings
    Michael Traber

Suggested Reading

Index

About the Contributors
CHAPTER 10

Emergent Values From American Indian Discourse

CYNTHIA-LOU COLEMAN

Uncle Joe lifts a sepia-tinted photograph from the living room wall and brings it to the table where we’re drinking coffee. Two chiseled faces peer through the framed glass. The faces seem identical—they are blood relatives, close in age, but one face bears a black ribbon of hair on a shaved scalp. A wreath of talons circles a strong neck and, like little ladders, silver earrings climb both ears. The other image looks Indian too, but the dark hair is grown collar-length, and the shirt and coat look like a white rancher’s. The framed photograph of Osage grandparents juxtaposes traditional and modern styles of living and thinking and being.

Like Uncle Joe’s photograph, an image may tell us what constitutes Indian identity. But such images—portrayed in movies, television, and books—produce only a partial reality and can be poor interpreters of what it means to be a Native American.

To understand identity, we must examine Indian values, for values undergird ways of knowing. Yet there is a danger in describing Native Americans simplistically by a set of commonalities. Indians, after all, are heterogeneous. We are defined by blood quantum, hair and eye color, grandparents, geographic location, job title, tribal government, reservation, religion, and so on. Moreover, Indian culture has assuredly changed, with the greatest acceleration occurring in the last few hundred years.

This chapter relies on Indian scholars and story-tellers to explain identity and from their wisdom, extracts values. Three central tenets emerge from the literature. Each is interrelated and reveals an underlying set of core values that are central to American Indian thought, behavior, and worldview. These tenets include sense of identity, sense of place, and sense of connectedness. Although the three tenets are neither inclusive nor exhaustive, they provide a focal point for the discussion. Following is a description of these tenets and an explanation of how each is relevant in understanding ethics.

Sense of Identity

Indian writers frequently address the question of identity. Their discourse raises issues of what qualities constitute Indian-ness, which has been defined in many different—and at times—oppositional ways. As one contemporary Native American lamented,

I search for something to validate myself as an Indian. I can make general statements about Indians such as: they are sharing and giving people, they lack materialism and live close to nature. But these apply only to Indians of the past who have lived close to the old culture. The true Indians are all but gone. (Nabokov, 1978/1991, p. 412)

I suspect that by “true Indians” and “old culture,” the speaker means Native Americans before the encroachment of settlers and traders. However, by describing “true Indians” we run the risk of stereotyping them. Scholar D’Arcy McNickle (1973/1979) notes that by quantifying and aggregating characteristics, we separate quality and substance, ending up with a distillation that lacks meaning. “When the problem is dealt with
quantitatively by cataloguing the known traits of a culture, the result is an abstraction describing nothing human” (p. 10). Moreover, few researchers have worked in depth with the hundreds of different Indian tribes and nations in an attempt to qualify characteristics that constitute tenets, values, or identity. Indeed, Vine Deloria, Jr. (1969) writes that “everyone” already knows that an Indian is “a food-gathering, berry-picking, semi-nomadic, fire-worshipping, high-plains-and-mountain-dwelling, horse-riding, canoe-toting, bead-using, pottery-making, ribbon-covered, wickiup-sheltered people” (pp. 81-82).

Although Deloria’s tongue-in-cheek narration relies on stereotypical images, Indian-ness has hardly remained static. An illustration of how the image of Indians shifted dramatically occurs in proportion to the increased value attached to resources (land and water, for example) in colonized North America. Several historians observe that in initial encounters with natives, they are described as noble. Following Columbus’s voyage to the New World, “the message was that there existed a people who did not live under the oppressive order that Europe lived under: the human being who lives this order of nature grows into a ‘noble man,’ a pure human being” (Mohawk, 1992, p. 440). But the noble being of the Americas would later be depicted as a bloodthirsty savage when settlers expanded westward, demanding further occupation of Indian territory (Berkhofer, 1978). The revised image paved the way for the justification of genocide:

As long as whites were dependent on them [Indians], this image was tempered by a romantic image of the Indians as “noble red man.” Gradually this gave way to an image of the Indian as bloodthirsty savage, a menace to the white civilization. This new image not only reflected the increasingly violent relationship between whites and Indians, but also set the ideological stage for wars of extermination that would eliminate the Indian “menace.” (Steinberg, 1989, p. 15)

Thus, Indian images shifted within a context, changing against the backdrop of a competing culture. Some argue strenuously that one cannot define Indian-ness without recognizing the “dominant” cultural context. Krupat (1993) writes, for example, that identity is grounded within such a context:

Identity—and where one speaks from—location—means social location, or social identity, and locations and identities are plural, complex, and con-

structured. Identities are not, as in the essentialized native/non-native opposition, unitary, simple and fixed or given in advance. (p. 87)

And Indians cannot determine their culture, Krupat adds, “in a manner entirely independent of the culture of Euro-Americans, of the U.S. government, the state bureaucracies, and the omnipresent ‘media’” (p. 84). A central question is raised: How can we distinguish so-called native culture from nonnative culture, particularly if we accept Krupat’s and McNickle’s views that culture is ever changing?

Deloria (1979) suggests that scholars should examine intersections where cultures conflict. Deloria points out that individualism (as opposed to communitarianism) is perhaps the most salient value to emerge from Euro-American ideology and is oppositional to native ideology. For Deloria, individualism is not so much an actual state of being as it is a construct reflecting false consciousness, and the grafting of external values—specifically Christian values—onto a native framework moves individuals “toward highly specific systems of obedience and disobedience and away from community” (Warrior, 1995, p. 76). Warrior and Deloria contend that Christian doctrine imposed on native societies presents an external system of values and one based on individualism.

Surely the value of individualism is one that unfolds within a social context. Constructionists such as George Herbert Mead (1962) argue that identity is operationalized within the family and community setting. It makes sense, then, that Euro-American culture would reinforce individualism, whereas native communities would reinforce communitarianism. And although many tribes have embraced Christianity (which Deloria says promotes individualism), some writers maintain that conversion hardly means a rejection of native values. Holm (1992) contends that “American Indians have a long history of altering (‘syncretizing’) alien cultural impositions in ways which serve their own sense of cultural identity and continuity” (p. 358). Holm uses the example of Cherokee Baptists who incorporate traditional (native) ways into Christian rituals, calling the process “nativization.” Similarly, Clifford (1988) suggests that marginal groups cut a swath through modernity. He eschews viewing the world as “populated by endangered authenticities,” instead viewing native cultures as negotiating their futures amid a complex social reality (p. 5). The resiliency to adapt to an ever-changing environment is characteristic of Indian people, despite continued attempts to ossify them in stasis.
The concept of culture, too, has shifted over time. In the mid-1900s, culture referred to a single evolutionary process with an emphasis on individuality. But the paradigm shifted to a more macrosocial conception of culture and began to be used in the plural, thus broadening its definition and marking a shift from an emphasis on the individual to the group (Clifford, 1988, p. 93). Culture, therefore, had been reconceptualized as dynamic and interactive.

When this conception is extended to Indian culture, we must recognize the inextricable relationship between Indian and non-Indian ("dominant") culture. This does not mean, though, that one culture simply envelopes another wholesale, as suggested by the view that the dominant society "neatly eclipse[s] every aspect of contemporary native reality, from land rights to issues of religious freedom" (Rose, 1992, p. 404). I disagree. Such thinking reduces native people to benign passivity and relinquishes values to the dominant culture. Indians reject being labeled as "relics," although many think of themselves as survivors—survivors of diseases such as alcohol and diabetes; survivors of a great Diaspora; survivors of communities scarred by uranium mining and toxic wastes; and survivors of external governments that displaced families wholesale and reconfigured tribal relationships. As a result, some external values have been adopted, some rejected, but American Indian ideals have been unquestionably entwined with Euro-American ethics, resulting in a sort of amalgam of reconstructed values.

Communities, central to tribal life, formed the foundation for values attached to freedom and kinship. Tribal life established the context for identity and social relationships, but colonization ripped apart traditional Indian families and communities. The word "tribe" as used here refers to Indian communities that are distinct from Euro-American communities. It is within the context of tribe that Indian identity emerges, which is why some writers note that extermination of tribes resulted in a loss of identity. For example, Larson (1991-1992) notes that the general allotment act of 1887 and the Burke Act of 1906 "began the fragmentation of individual Indian identity that remains one of the more important issues to be addressed among Indian people and the systems with which they interact" (p. 57). Such legislation split tribes and redistributed land from communities to individuals. By placing ownership of property in the hands of individual tribal members, lands were carved up into discrete pieces and tribal life changed forever (Coleman, 1994). Federal actions corralled Indians on reservations and broke down their social structures and opened their land, water, timber, and mineral resources to exploitation by non-Indians (Abourezk, 1977). The result was the decimation of tribal lands (Berkhofer, 1978; Deloria, 1974; Svensson, 1973).Colonization brought pressure to "abandon the tribal notion of identity in favor of individuality, a divide and conquer strategy" (Larson, 1991-1992, p. 57).

As a result of tribal upheaval, Native Americans struggled over reconstructing identity and definitions of self—for these were grounded in the tribe. As tribes became restructured, so too did notions of individual identity. The individual within the community has been at the heart of much literature, says Larson (1991-1992), who calls the process of negotiating identity "cultural bridging." The method entails bridging Indian and Euro-American cultures in an attempt to "take Indian culture forward and Euro-American culture back" (p. 60). This is beautifully illustrated in McNickle's (1936/1993) novel, The Surrounded, where characters negotiate their identities. Archilde's mother, Catharine, confronts a host of externally applied values that reside uncomfortably with her tribally based values. She recognizes the conflict through her marriage to a non-Indian and through her childhood Christian teachings, and she continually tries to bridge these different worldviews:

She learned also, after her marriage, that a white man does not care to have his relatives or his wife's relatives come to live with him. He will slam his door in their faces. That was contrary to the old way, because it was only right that if you could go and live with your relatives any time you got tired of your place, they in turn could come to you. A white man wanted his house to himself and you were not welcome there unless he asked you to come... She was an old woman now, and it seemed that the older she got the further she went on the trail leading backward. (pp. 172-173)

In The Surrounded, Catharine continually confronts oppositional values over community, family, kinship, religion, and identity.

The struggle to forge a new American Indian identity is continuing against formidable odds. This search is based on the conviction that Native America, like all other nations, has a right to belong. It includes the right to adhere to and cultivate values that are in tune with both history and the
future. This quest for social identity is one of the most deeply felt needs at this juncture of American Indian history.

Sense of Place

Whereas tribe may be considered a component of place, so too is land. "The central value of Indian life," Deloria (1974, p. 258) says, "is land." Land is understood—not in the sense of parcels, tracts, deeds, and fences—but rather through constructing land as place, home, hearth, and center. From this sense of place, meaning is derived and articulated. For the Lakota, religion and lands are "inextricable from identity" (Holm, 1992, p. 359).

Place as value. Land as value. Home as value. Each concept is inseparable from community. Family, tribe, and nation have not been held externally but incorporated into daily existence. An individual is not defined as being apart from community but physically and spiritually linked to people and place. As such, land is central to the tribe, and commodification of land has resulted in a clash over values.

The Indians wanted control of their lands, as they wanted control over other areas of their social and economic interests, but they were not prepared to abandon traditional values and transform their land holdings into taxable and merchantable pieces of impersonal real estate. They saw no inconsistency in wanting control and at the same time maintaining the inalienability of the lands protected by treaty guarantees. (McNickle, 1973/1979, pp. 148-149)

Similarly, in writing about the Indian intellectual tradition, Warrior (1995, p. 85) finds that "land and community are necessary starting points for the process of coming to a deep perception of the conflicts and challenges that face American Indian people and communities." Warrior's thesis is that, to understand tradition, students of native cultures must first comprehend the deep interrelationships of land, community, and religion. This means linking a sense of place with spiritual well-being.

Land is so intrinsic to Native Americans as to be considered their Mother. It is not just a romantic notion, but a cultural centerpiece providing spiritual sustenance as well as subsistence... For Native America, this connection often determines the values of the human landscape. (Larson, 1991-1992, pp 61-62)

Sense of place is critical for John Joseph Mathews (1934/1988), an Osage writer. In Sundown, the character Watching Eagle notes that the values carried by the white man fit poorly onto native values. Watching Eagle says,

White man came out of ground across that sea. His thoughts are good across that sea. His houses are beautiful across that sea, I believe. He came out of earth across that sea, and his songs are beautiful there. But he did not come out of earth here. His houses are ugly here because they did not come out of this earth, and his songs and those things which he thinks, those things which he talks, are ugly here, too. They did not come out of earth here. (p. 274)

Thus, for Mathews, aesthetics are tied to place and context ("his houses are ugly here because they did not come out of earth here").

Home for Native Americans is not just the family. Home is a geographic location that is circumscribed by a community's land. American Indians are creatures of the soil—the source of all nourishment and thus the source of life. In addition, home is hearth, where food is prepared and shared, where stories are told and retold, and where communal bonds are recreated in a celebration of life. But both community and family life are rooted in a concrete locality, and this sense of place is part of the grounding of life.

Sense of Connectedness

Interconnectedness of people to their communities, their past and future, and their land is a theme that permeates American Indian literature. "Balance" speaks to the relationships of individuals within communities and the relationships of all elements that constitute life. Balance ties values with behavior and religion with worldview. Indian writers often speak of a balance that exists between the natural world and native peoples. The balance can be upset, however, by external forces, such as the imposition of governmental structures. In writing about the environment in crisis, Winona LaDuke (1993) explains that the Ojibway people hold two central tenets as values—cyclical thinking and reciprocal relations. She writes that
Ojibway values represent "a continuous inhabitation of place, an intimate understanding of the relationship between humans and the ecosystem, and the need to maintain balance" (pp. 100-101). Her view is that industrialization cleaves people from their environments in an "insatiable quest for resources" (p. 100).

The conflict over resources reveals an underlying clash of values as Native American tribes wage battles in the courts and in the press over appropriate use of the earth (Coleman, 1995). This is the basis of the environmental struggle among the Ojibway of Northern Wisconsin, who bitterly opposed the siting of a copper mine on their territories in the early 1990s. Appropriate land use became a common thread in the conflict of values over the use of resources. According to one city councilman, who praised the mine: "The resources are here...they are of no value unless they are processed" (Rutlin, 1991, p. 1A). The Ojibway would argue, however, that the value of the copper cannot be separated from the earth itself. One tribal leader countered that, "We look at the environment as a whole, as something that we must abide with and live in and be a part of; and the non-Indian people in our view tend to look at the environment as something to be conquered and to modify and change to fit their own needs" (Treaty Rights, 1990, pp. 14-15).

In a similar vein, the values of environment, self, and community were addressed decades ago by Mathews, who, according to Warrior (1995), refused to separate life-forms from one another:

The difference between the Osage way of living with the land and that of the invading Euro-Americans was a difference not so much between primitive people and advanced people but between people who channeled their ornamentation urge toward balance with nature and those who, disastrously, considered the freedom of ornamentation to be a release from natural processes. (p. 65)

Mathews suggests that Euro-Americans objectify their surroundings and separate themselves from nature and from their environment, which, in effect, cleaves them from their community. Such values are opposed to traditional Ojibway and Osage worldviews of belonging and balance.

Last, it is impossible to escape the value of holism in native cultures. Indians embrace an interconnectedness in life, what LaDuke (1993) describes as "reciprocal relations" and "cyclical thinking." She notes,

Cyclical thinking, common to most indigenous or land-based cultures and value systems is an understanding that the world, time, and all parts of the natural order flow in cycles...Within this understanding is a clear sense of birth and rebirth, and a knowledge that what one does today will affect one in the future, on the return... A second concept, reciprocal relations, defines the responsibility and ways of relating between humans and the ecosystem. Simply stated, the resources of the ecosystem—whether wild rice or deer—are, with few exceptions, recognized as animate and, as such, gifts from the Creator...Within the practice of reciprocity is also an understanding that you take only what you need and leave the rest. (pp. 99-100)

In summary, traditional native ethics place high value on maintaining the balance between humans and environment. American Indian writers describe such values as the interdependence of people, animal, and plant life, in contrast to the European concept of the human species as "dominant over all species" (Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission, n.d.). Values form the nucleus of understanding how Indian communities manage their lives—as a whole rather than in chunks. However, such values—although embedded within native cultures—are descriptions, rather than predictions, of thinking and behavior. Sense of place, interconnectedness, reciprocal relationships, and the primacy of community together form an important foundation for native ethics, which are woven into the fabric of traditional Indian lives. These threads can be found in popular literature, scholarly writing, and Native American journalism.

The three tenets—sense of identity, of place, and of interconnectedness—emerge in native literature and arise from interactions with the Euro-American cultural system. But care must be taken to avoid treating each culture as distinct from one another. Too often, "tribal" is equated with "primitive," and Indian values are defined in atavistic terms that are "romantically beguiling but scientifically untenable" (McNickle, 1973/1979, p. 12). The challenge among native scholars is to remind critics that American Indian values continue to be negotiated within a broader cultural framework.

Ethical Implications for Communication

Indigenous or First People—who live all over the world—have rarely been credited for the contributions they have made to humanity as a whole and to many different cultures and religions. Their value systems were the
bedrock from which civilizations emerged. Their communal traditions formed the backgrounds influencing the origins of religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. They are "first" in the sense that they represent a cultural heritage—preceding all others—which is often described as communitarian. One central question is this: How will indigenous people enrich the ethical consciousness and moral conscience of our individualistic age, and what contributions can First People make?

Native Americans as well as other First People are steeped in a reverence for the web of life. The web of life comprises both the natural and the sociocultural environments, all parts of a whole: interconnected, interdependent, and reciprocal. If one is injured, the other suffers. If natural resources are exploited, people are likely to be exploited as well.

The web of life, or the created order, is the basis for ethics of indigenous people. Life is more than individual lives. Life is the interconnectedness of individuals. They are first and foremost part of a community, with a place, a hearth, and land. As a community, they are part of the life of nature, its soil, water, and sky. Perhaps the most important ethical principle of Native peoples is harmony or balance within the universe of being. Such harmony is achieved only by a reverence for life—all life in the created order. Communication ethics, therefore, is a reflection of the web of life.

This, according to Native American ethics, is the proper role of communication: to cultivate and safeguard life. This is the paradigm that indigenous stories represent.

A second ethical principle emerges from the Native Americans' search for social identity. Indeed, our survival has been marked by resiliency in the face of political, economic, and social attempts at destruction and assimilation. Adaptation to tremendous change, however, has not extinguished our culture nor has Euro-American ideology engulfed and replaced native ethics. As scholars, we need to articulate these cultural dimensions and acknowledge the active resistance on the part of indigenous peoples to either resist external value systems or renegotiate their meanings. And although it may be true that Indian ethics arise from internal needs, identity, and community, such values are operationalized within an external context—through behavior and communication. Such interactions, by definition, occur within the vast framework of a multilayered and constructed reality. By necessity, Indian culture is dynamic and resilient.

All this must be viewed against the background of a long history of oppression, exploitation, acculturation, commodification, and near annihilation of our people. Still, the hegemonic discourse about Native Americans persists to this day. This discourse must be changed to one based on the genuine acknowledgment of American Indians as Others, with respectful acknowledgment of their very Otherness. This is a fundamental ethical principle of communications. And this principle, a priori, is the active recognition—through communication—of Others as beings with equal dignity. A second a priori principle is equally important: the active acceptance of Otherness as a unique human good. This should be the precondition of a renaissance of Native American culture, which is not only oriented to the past but also to the future, with a promise of myriad new cultural expressions.

There is, however, a third aspect in the act of acknowledging the Other. It is often forgotten that part of "Otherness" is the history of injury, trauma, and bewilderment. The recognition of this side of Otherness implies both co-responsibility and solidarity. Such acknowledgment has a liberating potential for all partners in the communication process. Then, the ethical principle of recognition of the Other leads to another principle of communication ethics: liberation. In acknowledging Others, we liberate ourselves from the fetters of denial and negation and rise to a new communicative freedom.

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Uncle Joe pokes his thumb at the picture, and explains how each man chose a path—one the traditional Osage way—while the other adopted the way of the white settlers. Joe grins and asks me, "Who is to say which way is right?"

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Values From American Indian Discourse