



# Dr John Stewart

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## Intimate communication through co-creating uniqueness

### Research Objectives

John uses his expertise in interpersonal communication and philosophy to help people understand how the quality of their lives is directly related to the quality of their communicating.

### Detail

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### Bio

After a PhD from the University of Southern California in 1970, John taught at the University of Washington for 32 years. In 2001 he became Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of Dubuque (UD), Eastern Iowa, where in 2010 he became Special Assistant to the President. He is now Emeritus Professor at UD and volunteers at a number of local initiatives including the Multicultural Family Centre and Inclusive Dubuque.

### Collaborators

- Prof Jody Koenig Kellas, Department of Communication Studies, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE, USA
- Prof Valerie Manusov, Department of Communication, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA
- Prof Robert Arundale, Emeritus, Department of Communication, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK, USA



### References

- Stewart, J. (2021): Stereotyping, Empathizing, Co-constructing Uniquenesses: A Reflection on Intimacy, *Atlantic Journal of Communication*. Published Online. Available at [doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2021.1890075](https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2021.1890075)
- Stewart, J. & Kellas, J.K. (2020) Co-constructing uniqueness: An interpersonal process promoting dialogue, *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 28:1, 5–21. Available at [doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2020.1684289](https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2020.1684289)
- Stewart, J. (2017) *Personal Communicating and Racial Equity*, rev. ed. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt). Chapter 6, 'Help Uniquenesses Meet'.

### Personal Response

**Could you expand on the ethical implications of these intimate dialogues for changing the way people treat one another?**

// Ethics focuses centrally on 'oughts': individually, ethics prompts us to reflect on and potentially revise what we 'ought to do' in challenging situations. One ethical implication of this article is about the crucial importance of co-constructing, of collaboration. No individual knows what's best for any other, which means that each individual's change efforts should begin with an invitation to affected others to be a full partner in the process. A second ethical implication concerns the image of intimacy developed here. Intimate connection emerges most centrally not when similarities are revealed, but when uniquenesses are co-constructed. When we long for intimate connection, we ought to consider seriously co-constructing uniquenesses. //

# Intimate communication through co-creating uniqueness

Dr John Stewart proposes that people can fulfil the deep human need for connection with others in dialogic conversations. At the heart of this process lies the concept of individual 'uniqueness'. This can be co-constructed by the partners in dialogic conversation, as each takes turns sharing unique aspects of themselves and helping the uniqueness of the other to emerge. Getting to know the other person as a unique human being goes beyond empathy, and enables a sense of intimacy and an enriched relationship based on understanding individual differences.

Humans have a fundamental need for close relationships that provide a sense of deep connection with others. Dr John Stewart has dedicated decades of conceptual and empirical research to understanding what enables people to attain this state of intimate human connection. Through extensive reviews of theoretical frameworks intertwined with close reading of actual conversations, he has mapped out key features of the process through which dialogue can create intimacy between individuals. At the heart of this process, he believes, lies the concept of individuals' 'uniqueness' which can be co-constructed by conversation partners in their verbal and nonverbal talk.

## LISTENING

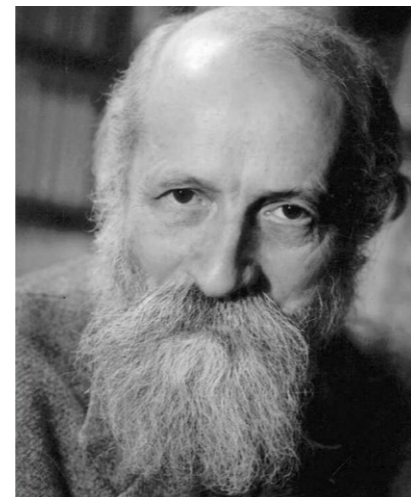
Dr Stewart explains that dialogue is a collaborative process of communicating in which verbal and non-verbal information evolves into meaning. Listening is a fundamental skill essential for effective communication, and it has many layers. At a basic level, listening is important to understand conversation content, but genuine listening also requires empathy. Empathy is a fundamental skill in a number of professional fields, including clinical medicine and psychotherapy, and many different understandings of what it involves have developed over time. Traditionally, empathy has been understood as the ability to, emotionally and cognitively, grasp another person's experiences by setting aside the self to enter the world of the other person. This understanding of empathy is problematic because of a version of the bootstrap problem – the self-purported to be doing the setting aside is the very one supposedly being set aside. Other definitions have pointed out that empathy requires some similarity in

personal experiences. Dr Stewart proposes instead that when conversation partners enable one another to express their uniquenesses, they can move beyond empathy and towards an intimacy based on understanding relevant features of each other's differences. This kind of conversational engagement requires that each partner listen in a way that allows for self-disclosure and mutual confirmation.

## INDIVIDUAL UNIQUENESS

Empathy, then, is limited in what it can accomplish, because it is based on similarity rather than difference. And uniqueness, Dr Stewart argues, is about difference. Listening with compassion helps elements of this uniqueness to be shared and understood. The reality of human uniqueness is affirmed each time a student of history recognises that there will never be another Socrates, Mother Teresa, Hitler, Mandela, or the student themselves. Understanding a conversation partner in his or her uniqueness allows for a sense of deep connection that enriches the quality of the relationship.

Although each person inherently brings elements of his or her uniqueness into every conversation, mutual



Austrian philosopher Martin Buber.

understanding of these elements requires co-construction. This happens when conversation partners verbally and nonverbally make available aspects of who they are as an individual while inviting the other to reciprocate. This process is the opposite of stereotyping; hence the title of this essay. Personalist philosopher Martin Buber prominently foregrounded the significance of this process in his seminal work, *I and Thou*, and many of the hundreds of works he published between 1923 and his death in 1965. The need for, and impact of, co-constructing uniquenesses is also illustrated in two important 21st-century books about profound human division and profound human contact.

## CO-CONSTRUCTING INTIMACY

Dr Stewart analyses two examples in particular. The first is a conversation between central characters Ronald Cotton and Jennifer Thompson-Cannino in their book *Picking Cotton: Our Memoir of Injustice and Redemption*. Ronald was imprisoned for 11 years after being identified by Jennifer as her rapist, and later was exonerated by DNA evidence. On his release, he wanted to hear Jennifer's thoughts about what had happened. Dr Stewart's close reading of their conversation displays in detail how they co-constructed uniquenesses when they met, and illustrates the profound impact this event had on both their lives. In Isabel Wilkerson's best-selling book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*, Dr Stewart finds a second example of how co-constructing uniquenesses transformed the relationship between a black woman and a white man. Many of the elements present in the Jennifer-Ronald conversation also occur in this case: explicit appeals to the other's humanity; reciprocally-conditioned interpretations; mindful presence to each other; and choosing to share. In both cases the protagonists were able to move beyond the stereotyped preconceptions that had determined their original communication.

Dr Stewart says that co-constructing uniquenesses can occur when conversation partners engage in certain practices. Firstly, we should be mindful, which entails being present and



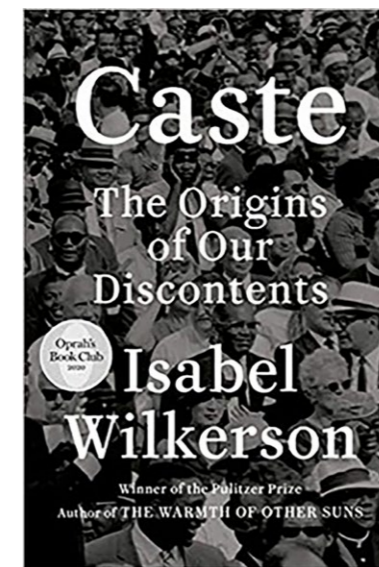
Ronald Cotton and Jennifer Thompson-Cannino at PopTech conference, Camden, Maine, in 2010.

attentive to the other person's verbal and nonverbal communicating, while also practicing reflective listening to extend the other person's conversation and add examples from one's own life. Secondly, is to engage in reflecting on our own thoughts, preferences, and actions, which embody unique aspects of ourselves, so that we can share these in conversation with others while encouraging our conversation partners to share their own reflections. Thirdly, we need to be open to emergent meaning

within conversation; this means listening attentively and with interest, to be able to hear new and surprising elements of the other person. Finally, through being aware of the choices a person makes in conversation, we can also probe, explore, and understand their uniqueness.

Many traditional beliefs about how to approach management, learning, and wellness, Dr Stewart believes, can be helpfully revised in light of this

**People can co-create an intimate understanding of others and establish a deep sense of connection and relationship.**



Wilkerson's best-seller contains a clear example of co-constructing uniquenesses.

analysis. Keeping one's distance and clinging to objectivity in personal and professional relationships does not always serve us well. Instead, working towards the conversational goal of co-constructing uniqueness can enable individuals to establish a deeper sense of connection. This has potentially profound implications for improving outcomes through, for example, person-centred medicine and organisational change. And, beyond this, co-constructing uniqueness could also be a potent way to respond to today's deep cultural polarisation. Dr Stewart's work, backed up by a body of studies of actual conversations, show that optimal communication happens when uniquenesses meet.

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