

C H A P T E R 1

An Orientation to Organizational Communication

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ORGANIZATION AND COMMUNICATION

The Concept of Organization

Human beings organize in the simplest sense to get things done. We define and arrange positions or roles, then we engage in concerted action with one another by coordinating these roles to accomplish some purpose. But this idea is just the proverbial tip of the organizational iceberg. Organizations often are very elaborate and complicated forms of human

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endeavor. They are not only vehicles for clear, cooperative action, but also sites of conflict and confusion. An organization may have a singular mission but many different reasons for its actual existence, and these varying reasons and the forces arising from them may not enjoy a peaceful coexistence.

Unless you are literally a hermit, organizations affect many aspects of your life, and you affect the lives of others through your own involvement with organizations. Even if you work alone or in a so-called independent business, you are enabled and constrained by human organizations around you. The clock radio that jolted you into action this morning most likely was produced by an organization, i.e., in the factory of some electronics company. This morning's shower? Courtesy of your local government and the municipal employees who run the water treatment plant and maintain the distribution system as well as the utility company that provided the energy to heat that water. Breakfast? Unless you got it from your own farm or garden, it came to you through a complex system of organizations including producers, processors, distributors, and retailers. The morning news? Brought to you by a media organization of reporters, editors, technicians, and salespeople who themselves depend on other organizations to provide advertising revenue.

Before you are even on your way out the door to work or school, your life is touched in some way by various organizations. We could continue this exercise in the ubiquity of organizations for the rest of your day, but you probably already get the point. Human beings in contemporary society live in, live with, depend on, and contribute to a complex and interacting system of organizations. And we are the organizations in which we live.

Although it is common practice in the American idiom to speak of organizations as if they exist apart from the people who constitute them, this is just not the case. Yes, individuals, perhaps even entire generations of them, come and go while the organization or institution remains, but the organization is constituted, is enacted, and exists through interaction among the people who constitute it at any point in time. In other words, an organization happens through the concerted actions of its members. Inasmuch as the basis for concerted action is communication, the process of human communication is the central feature of organization. As Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn, two prominent social psychologists, observed decades ago, "Communication . . . is the very essence of a social system or organization" (1978, p. 428).

The distinction between the idea that an organization is something like a container in which human action and interaction occur and the idea that the organization *is* human interaction may seem like hair-splitting, but this distinction is very important in understanding organizations from a communication scholar's point of view. In the early years of organizational communication studies, the "container" concept was the generally accepted point of view (Conrad & Poole, 2005). Communication was something that occurred inside the organization, so communication was all about the content and flow of messages and information through formal and informal channels. We will say more about this traditional perspective later in this chapter and throughout the book. The point for now is that scholarly and even societal perspectives on organizations changed over time. Conrad and Poole describe the change concisely: "Organizational communication theorists started viewing communication as more than the transfer of information; they saw it as a complex, multi-dimensional process through which organizing took place" (p. 9).

Recently, the "container" concept of the organization has enjoyed a second awakening, but now in a form that is very different from its original notion. As stated by Joann Keyton

(2004), “An organization can change its physical location and replace its members without breaking down because it is essentially a patterned set of discourses that at some point in time were created by the members and codified into norms and practices that are later inherited, accepted, and adapted to by newcomers” (p. 10).

From this point of view, one would say that the “container” is this set of discursive practices, i.e., the patterned set of discourses to which Keyton refers. The idea that an organization is a set of discursive practices is difficult to grasp if you are not used to thinking this way. Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) contend that discourse and communication are not exactly the same thing, although they might be defined in about the same terms in most ordinary dictionaries. But communication involves a lot of processes and structures, including many transient and fleeting interactions. Discourse more particularly concerns the language that we use to talk about something. Discourse analysts and theorists are concerned with the uses of language, i.e., discursive practices, as well as the connection between these practices and enduring ways of thinking and acting. The organizational container of discursive practice shapes and constrains its members, although successive generations of members may change the shape of the container as well. The idea is a little complicated, but it helps to explain, for example, why Wal-Mart worked and FEMA failed during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We will tell you more about discourse and discursive practices later in the book.

The Concept of Communication

So what is communication? In the past, we ourselves have defined communication essentially as a process of creating shared meaning through the use of signs and symbols. The process occurs in and among dyads, groups, and larger social structures through many means and for many purposes. This definition is okay insofar as it goes, but certainly some scholars would say that it does not go far enough. Communication is not merely a process of creating shared meaning, but also of constructing social realities in ways that are coordinated and actively managed (Pearce & Cronen, 1980). As explained by Donal Carbaugh, “Communication is socially situated meaning-making, generating pockets of coherence and community through cultural meanings and forms” (1988, p. 38).

This book is about the communication processes that characterize human organizations, processes referred to collectively as organizational communication. Our aim is to present a broad survey that will provide you with a sound foundation of concepts for understanding and discussing this subject. No one book or course is going to cover everything that you could or should learn about organizational communication. This book is no exception. It is intended only as an introduction to the field of study.

We think that this book will be more useful to you if you understand something about the background for the book and for the course in which it is being used. In order to provide that background, we need to answer three basic questions:

1. Why is the study of organizational communication useful to you?
2. How did this field of study develop?
3. What is the status of the field today?

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The answers to these three questions provide background for this book and for the course in which it is being used. A really good understanding of the field depends on some familiarity with this background.

Studying Organizational Communication

You may have wondered from time to time just why you should enroll in a particular course or of what relevance and importance the course is going to be to you. In the case of organizational communication, we see at least three reasons for studying this topic:

1. You can improve your understanding of organizations and of your own experiences as an organization member.
2. You can develop awareness of the kinds of communication skills that are important in organizations.
3. The course may start you down the path to a career as a communication professional in an organization or as an academic scholar in the field.

Understanding Organizations

“I’ve seen all of this before, but I never had a way to make sense of it until I took this course.” This is a common remark that we hear from students who have just completed their first course in organizational communication. Because organizations are constituted through communication, the study of organizational communication provides a basis for understanding virtually every *human* process that occurs in organizations. Conflict, cooperation, decision making, the use of power and authority, compliance gaining, resistance, innovation and change, morale and cohesion, relationship development, and the creation and maintenance of organizational cultures all are reflected in organizational communication.

The study of organizational communication is not intended to provide insights about *every* aspect of human organizations. It is not a study of the technology for creating a product or service or of the methods for producing and marketing these things. It is not a study of cost control and financing or of laws and regulations governing business and employment practices. Such topics can be relevant to organizational communication, and some people in the field spend a lot of time discussing them, but organizational communication primarily is concerned with the content, structure, and process of human interaction through language and other symbols in day-to-day organizational activities.

Awareness of Skills

There is broad, general agreement that well-developed communication skills are essential to personal effectiveness in organizations or, at least, in managerial, professional, and leadership positions (Munter, 2002). Review any survey of skills that organizations expect of new college graduates on entry into the job market, and you probably will find communication skills featured prominently in the list (Stevens, 2005).

The kinds of communication skills that new college graduates should possess in order to meet organizational expectations can be developed through courses in public speaking, interviewing, group discussion, and writing. Sometimes, a number of these skills are taught

in one course with a title such as “Business and Professional Communication.” The introductory course in organizational communication usually is not concerned with training in specific individual communication skills. It does focus attention on many of the practical demands in organization life that require good personal communication skills. These demands and the situations in which they arise are reflected in examples throughout this text.

Career Opportunities

The study of organizational communication also is important because many organizations have developed an intense interest in this subject. Leaders and decision makers in such organizations not only want themselves and others to possess good communication skills, but also want an understanding of the dynamics of organizational communication. Many apparently are convinced that there is a strong connection between communication effectiveness and organizational effectiveness (Morley, Shockley-Zalabak, & Cesaria, 2002).

Although organization leaders often understand “organizational effectiveness” only in terms of increased productivity, profits, improved work performance, customer service, or higher morale, the belief that effective communication is essential to these conditions has led to a variety of career opportunities in organizational communication.

Today, many organizations employ writers, editors, and media specialists to produce and distribute company magazines, newsletters, films, videos, and even closed-circuit television programs for an audience composed of the organization membership. People in these occupations usually are trained in journalism or media production. A flourishing training and development industry also has emerged as organizations have hired staff professionals and outside consultants to help them evaluate and change organizational communication practices. This industry includes people who teach communication concepts and skills to organization members (usually to managers and supervisors), evaluate the effectiveness of organizational communication, and help to improve interpersonal, group, and public communication processes in organizational settings (Dewine, 2001).

The demand for communication professionals in organizations does not mean that a course or even a major related to organizational communication will lead to a job in the field. Although several occupations are concerned in some way with organizational communication, students who think that they are going to get a job in something called “organizational communication” really need to understand that this label refers to a field of academic study and not to any identifiable profession. “Organizational communication” does not appear as a job category anywhere in the U.S. Department of Labor’s *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*, and many employers may not even know that the field exists. In 2004, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) predicted faster-than-average growth in the early 21st century for occupations related to organizational communication, but they also noted that competition for entry-level positions will be intense. It is not easy to break into this field. Many positions in training and development began to require a Master’s degree years ago, and some require a doctoral degree (Redding, 1979). If you are thinking of a career related to organizational communication, you must obtain a thorough education and be able to apply what you know. Whether or not you pursue such a career, an organizational communication course should be helpful to you in any organizational role that you may assume.

Development of the Field

Although scholars in various disciplines have studied communication in organizations for many years, the development of organizational communication as an identifiable field with courses and academic programs in university departments of communication did not begin until the 1950s. W. Charles Redding, himself a major force in the development of the field, traced its origins to a convergence of interest in “business speech” and “industrial communication” that emerged in the wake of World War II (Redding, 1985; Tompkins & Redding, 1988). By the early 1950s, doctoral students in speech departments at Northwestern University, Ohio State University, Purdue University, and the University of Southern California were producing dissertations on industrial communication. In 1952, Purdue’s speech department established its Industrial Communication Research Center. Annual conferences that brought together professors of speech and communication with social scientists from other disciplines provided forums for discussion and definition of the emerging field.

Skills-oriented “how to” books on communication for managers began to appear in the late 1950s, but the concerns of the field already were expanding beyond these narrow prescriptive interests to embrace description and explanation of organizational communication processes in general. According to Redding, general academic acceptance of the field of organizational communication was signaled by several events in 1967 and 1968, which included a NASA-sponsored conference on organizational communication and the creation of the Organizational Communication Division of the International Communication Association.

The rapid emergence of organizational communication as an academic field has been accompanied by some healthy, but occasionally troublesome, growing pains. Scholars have found it difficult to create an identity for the field. At first, this difficulty arose from similarities between organizational communication and other fields of study. Later, it involved the development of several different and sometimes competing approaches to the study of organizational communication. Although both of these identity problems have been troubling, each in its own way has helped to develop and refine the field. In order to explain the point of view of this book, we must first review some of the history involved in these two identity problems.

Relationship to Other Fields

Communication scholars began to study organizations at a time when other social and behavioral sciences already had a long history of organizational research. The new field of organizational communication borrowed heavily from ideas developed in these more established disciplines. Consequently, it was difficult at times to tell the difference between organizational communication, organizational psychology, organizational sociology, and organizational behavior as fields of study. Sharing ideas between different academic disciplines is both useful and necessary in order to develop a good understanding of our world. However, ideas from one field often have to be adapted to fit the needs of another field, and organizational communication scholars frequently borrowed ideas without making such adaptations.

When psychologists, sociologists, and social psychologists began to study organizations in the 20th century, they certainly were concerned with many processes related to human communication. They often encouraged organizations to pay attention to communication and interpersonal relationships, but their explanations of organizational behavior did not focus on human communication.

For example, management theorists of that era such as Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard (1982) often were interested in the problem of motivating employees to be productive. They relied on theories of motivation in which the behavior of individual human beings is explained as a means of meeting physical, social, and psychological needs. If asked about the role of communication in organizational behavior, these theorists might say that communication is one of several types of motivated behavior in organizations or that it is a means of motivating organization members. From this point of view, communication is only one ingredient among many in a recipe for organizational behavior. The central problem is to understand human motivation in organizations and the role of motivation in organizational effectiveness (i.e., in getting people to work more productively). Communication is merely a peripheral concern.

When the field of organizational communication imported concepts from other disciplines, it also imported their peripheral views of human communication in organizations along with a preoccupation with organizational effectiveness. Communication scholars identified dozens of elements in organizational communication, then studied the relationships of these elements to a veritable grab bag of factors in organizational effectiveness. For example, we asked questions about the relationship between organizational communication and productivity, job satisfaction, turnover, and absenteeism. Most researchers studied “economic” organizations engaged in the creation and delivery of products or services. Communication became “one more variable” that figured into organizational effectiveness.

The field’s early emphasis on organizational effectiveness is understandable insofar as effectiveness has been (and generally still is) the principal concern of people in charge of economic organizations. However, attempts to relate many elements in organizational communication to various indicators of organizational effectiveness quickly produced a large body of disjointed and fragmented research (Dennis, Goldhaber, & Yates, 1978). The field consisted of hundreds of individual facts and bits of knowledge like so many pieces of an unassembled jigsaw puzzle. We needed theories of organizational communication, *per se*, in order to integrate and organize our work.

The need to define the field of organizational communication more clearly led to several new developments in the late 1970s and early 1980s. While many scholars worked to refine the traditional social science themes that already had developed in the field, others began to study organizational communication in ways that differed substantially from the traditional approach. Consequently, several different points of view or perspectives on the study of organizational communication were introduced in the 1980s. The description of these perspectives in the next section completes our discussion of the development of organizational communication as a field of study. This will put us in a position to answer to the final question for this chapter regarding the status of the field.

PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

There are various ways of organizing and describing organizational communication perspectives. Some scholars identify several. Others identify only two. We come down somewhere in the middle by describing three that we call traditional, interpretive, and critical. Our discussion here is essentially a synthesis of previous descriptions presented by Linda Putnam (1982) and Philip Tompkins and Charles Redding (1988).

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The Traditional Perspective

The traditional perspective is so called simply because it is the oldest of the three. For many years, scholars accepted almost without question the notion that organizational communication would be studied mainly from this point of view.

Traditionalists regard organizations as objects that can be studied with the concepts and methods of traditional social science. Traditionalists believe that organizational communication is an objectively observable activity. It can be measured, labeled, classified, and related to other organizational processes. For example, suppose we want to know whether managers' styles of communicating with employees have any effect on employee job satisfaction. We think that employees will be more satisfied when managers adopt an "open" style of communication, but we are not sure. A traditionalist might answer this question through the following actions:

1. Observe and measure managers' communicative behaviors in order to classify each manager as high or low in "communication openness."
2. Measure the levels of job satisfaction among each manager's employees.
3. Statistically analyze the measurements to see whether employee job satisfaction is greater under "high-openness" managers than it is under "low-openness" managers.

Traditionalists in organizational communication often are concerned with the relationship between communication processes and organizational effectiveness. They study factors in organizational communication such as information flow within organizational networks, distortion of messages, breakdowns in channels of communication, strategies of managers and supervisors in communicating with their subordinates, and the dynamics of group problem solving and decision making. If some of these ideas are unfamiliar to you at this point, there is no need to worry. Some of the chapters that follow this one are concerned with defining and elaborating on these concepts.

The traditional perspective itself has changed somewhat over the years, so we find it useful to distinguish between early and contemporary forms of this perspective. Early traditionalists treated the organization as a machine. This machine is an engineered set of interconnected parts that operates by managerial control and depends on well-maintained communication in order to function efficiently and effectively. Managers control the machine through principles and techniques of gaining compliance and cooperation from employees. The various parts of the machine (departments, individuals) are supposed to act in a coordinated manner. Both control and coordination depend on effective communication. Communication is understood primarily as a process of sending and receiving messages. Communication effectiveness involves two conditions: (1) the processes of message sending and receiving are accurate and reliable, and (2) the message receiver understands and responds to the message in the way that the message sender intends.

This emphasis on communication effectiveness for managerial control also suggests a distinct political position in early traditionalism. There is no getting around the fact that organizations are political entities. Organizations are political because they have systems for allocating and using power and resources and because they have ways of protecting and maintaining these systems. Who has power? Who gets resources, privileges, and rewards? Which groups or

individuals control the fates of others, and how do they accomplish this control? Whose interests are privileged by the ways in which organizational goals are defined and achieved? By working to produce communication effectiveness, early traditionalists implicitly privileged the political interests of owners, managers, and leaders over those of other organizational groups.

Although some traditionalists continue to embrace the early view of organizations, most have refined their perspective with more contemporary ideas that differ from the early version. The early concept of the organization as a machine gave way to the idea that the organization is like an organism, i.e., a living system (Monge, Farace, Eisenberg, Miller, & White, 1984). Organizations are more like living systems than machines in two ways. First, the idea of management control over the organizational machine sounds something like a person's running a lawn mower or driving a car. Organizations, like living systems, are a lot more complicated. They have many systems of self-regulation and control. Managerial designs and intentions are important factors, but they are not the only factors that regulate an organizational system. Internally, unions, trade and professional groups, workgroups, and even informal coalitions may exert substantial control over the organization. Externally, local, state, and federal government agencies, as well as consumer or community groups, also regulate or, at least, influence the system.

Moreover, different organizational subsystems (for example, departments, work groups, and individuals) do not generally work together in machinelike harmony. Although they cooperate to accomplish a common purpose, they also may be in conflict. They often compete for resources, assert different values, and desire different ways of ordering work and organizational life. Even "management" usually is not an undifferentiated monolith that acts with a single-minded purpose. Vice-presidents of different divisions squabble over territory. Middle managers compete with one another for rank and privilege. Leaders of different functional areas may regard each other with contempt and actively struggle over the best way to accomplish an organization's mission.

Second, organizations, unlike machines, change and adapt to change. The people who make up organizations process information and make choices based on interpretations of situations and circumstances. They plan in order to accomplish goals. They make decisions to expand or to cut back, to begin new activities, to redefine or stop old activities, and to restructure the order of the organization or to maintain it.

Traditionalists also have changed their ideas about organizational effectiveness. They are still concerned with the relationship between communication and organizational effectiveness, but they have expanded the idea of organizational effectiveness to include more than managerial objectives such as productivity and morale. Organizational effectiveness also includes the welfare of organization members in general and the overall quality of organizational life (Dessler, 1980; French, Bell, & Zawacki, 1983; Pace, 1983). This shift in emphasis changes the political position of traditionalism as well inasmuch as attention to the welfare of organization members in general means that managerial and leadership interests cannot automatically be privileged over everyone else's.

What would traditional concepts and methods in organizational communication contribute to understanding or preventing the response failures during the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe that we described in the prologue for this book? In addition to the immediate failure of electronic communications systems, many of the problems involved failures in human communication, and some of these failures may have occurred before Katrina even struck. For example, Egelhoff and Sen (1992) wrote in an organizational communication journal years ago that a crisis such as a major natural disaster will produce confusion about lines of

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authority and responsibility and create conditions that cannot be managed with existing operating structure and information processing capabilities. This kind of crisis “will be most effectively dealt with by decentralizing crisis management activity” (p. 465), assuming, of course, that the right resources and skill sets are available in that decentralized arrangement.

Although Egelhoff and Sen were writing about crisis management by corporations, their predictions might apply just as easily to Katrina. The 426-page National Response Plan that we mentioned earlier assumes, “Incidents are typically managed at the lowest possible geographic, organizational, and jurisdictional level” (p. 6). If an incident rises to the level of “National Significance,” the Secretary of Homeland Security is supposed to step in to coordinate operations and resources, i.e., to centralize at least to some extent the management of the event. Under the plan, Governor Blanco’s declaration on Saturday that Katrina would overwhelm state and local capabilities should have triggered this level of centralization before the storm hit on Monday, but that kind of coordination came much later. Moreover, much of the language in relevant law and planning documents treated the federal role as one of providing “supplementary assistance,” and the governor herself used this language in her request for help (Louisiana Governor’s Office, 2005).

The problem in this instance may not have been centralization versus decentralization as much as it was confusion over locus of control. Although 40 different agencies convened in Baton Rouge to get organized two days before the storm, the subsequent confusion over locus of control undermined coordination at all levels. The traditional organizational communication scholar might be disappointed, but not at all surprised that communication failed and confusion prevailed.

One also must take into account the point of view from which a structure is seen as centralized or decentralized. At one level, Wal-Mart, unhampered by entanglements and accountability within a centralized government bureaucracy, mounted a nimble response. But within Wal-Mart itself, the locus of control for emergency response most assuredly is centralized with Jason Jackson and his emergency operations team.

The Interpretive Perspective

The second important perspective is the interpretive perspective, which regards organizations as *cultures* (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1984). When we think about the idea of a people’s culture, most of us probably think about their way of life, including everything from their homes and clothing to their language and customs. Now a culture certainly includes all of these things, but it also involves a lot more. According to anthropologist W. A. Haviland (1993), “Culture consists of the abstract values, beliefs, and perceptions that lie behind people’s behavior” (p. 29). This idea captures the essential difference between the interpretivist and the traditionalist. The traditionalist understands the world of social action by studying and relating observable and tangible actions and conditions. The interpretivist tries to uncover the culture that, as Haviland says, lies behind these actions and conditions.

To the interpretivist, the organization is a subjective rather than objective phenomenon. Social action is possible only to the extent that people can share subjective meanings. The culture of an organization is a network of such meanings. Thus, an organization exists in the shared experiences of the people who constitute it. This does not mean that the organization is an unreal figment of someone’s imagination. It means, instead, that organizational reality is socially constructed through communication (Putnam, 1982).

Now what exactly is a socially constructed reality? It is a reality that is created and sustained through our interaction with one another. Consider, for example, the “reality” of a five-dollar bill. Objectively, it is a piece of paper with ink markings on it and worth no more than the minuscule costs of that paper and ink and the process needed to produce it. Yet you can trade this objectively worthless piece of paper for lunch at your favorite fast-food restaurant with no questions asked. Why? Because we have a socially constructed agreement about the “worth” of a five-dollar bill. Now there are many objective factors that will influence this social construction (e.g., the availability of goods and services for exchange), but the five-dollar bill is what it is only because we make it so and maintain its value in our transactions.

There is, of course, a lot more to the social construction of reality than the value of a five-dollar bill. A socially constructed reality such as a culture involves a complex web of shared meanings, filters for and shapers of our beliefs and experiences, and ways of acting toward one another as well as “outsiders.” Interpretive scholars are interested in revealing the socially constructed realities of organizations. They study communication as the process through which this social construction occurs. Consequently, they are interested in the symbols and meanings involved in various forms of organizational action. Interpretivists attempt to describe the ways in which organization members understand their experiences through communication and how they enact “the organization” on the basis of shared meanings. In this sense, an organization is a negotiated order, i.e., a product of our collective discourse and transactions.

In our description of traditionalism, we illustrated how a traditionalist might try to find out about the relationship between management communication style and employee job satisfaction by measuring these two conditions and statistically analyzing the measurements. How would an interpretivist approach the problem of understanding employee experiences of managers’ communication styles?

To begin with, the interpretivist probably would not ask specific questions about concepts such as “openness” and “satisfaction” and certainly would not attempt to measure these conditions. Instead, the interpretivist is more likely to ask organization members to provide illustrations or stories about their experiences. Then, the interpretivist analyzes and describes the themes that appear in these reports. These themes reveal the ways in which organization members share their experiences and socially construct an understanding of these experiences. If an idea such as the importance of openness in managers’ communication happens to appear as a theme in the reports, the interpretivist might discuss it as an indication of how organization members use “openness” to understand their relationships with managers. The interpretivist’s goal is to reveal those communicative activities that occur in a variety of settings to produce the unique character of an organization (Smilowitz, 1982).

How would interpretivists view organizational actions before, during, and after a crisis such as Katrina? In fact, interpretive scholars in organizational communication have studied these kinds of events and applied their concepts to explain failures and improve future response. For example, Sellnow, Seeger, and Ulmer (2002) noted that the “tendency of crisis managers . . . to see novel events according to previous experience is well documented in the crisis literature” (p. 287). They applied an interpretive use of chaos theory in a case study of the 1997 Red River Valley floods to show how this tendency inhibits effective crisis management.

How does this happen? A quest for predictability leads crisis managers to assume that their traditional methods and tools are adequate, that the current crisis can be managed like previous crises. In the 1997 Red River floods, “officials continued this strategy, despite the extreme conditions” (p. 279). They simply failed to recognize that they were confronting a

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novel situation. This led to a so-called cosmology episode, i.e., a collapse of organizational sense-making capability. As the flood broke a 100-year-old record, prior planning and tried-and-true methods failed. One operations manager said, “No one has ever seen this much water in the Fargo [North Dakota] area, ever. All we can do is react” (p. 279). Another admitted, “We’re dealing with an unknown” (p. 279). From an interpretive point of view, was FEMA’s fog of confusion during Katrina another perfect illustration of a cosmology episode?

Sellnow, Seeger, and Ulmer went on to describe how the crisis management system during the Red River floods gradually self-organized, i.e., how order reemerged from a chaotic state. A lot of self-organizing also happened at various levels of government in the wake of Katrina.

The Critical Perspective

Critical scholars differ from traditional and interpretive scholars in various ways, but one difference is especially significant: Critical scholars regard organizations as instruments of privilege or even outright oppression. They focus their attention on the relationship between privileged classes (or privileged conditions) and disadvantaged or oppressed organizational groups. They are concerned with the way in which that relationship is created and sustained through symbols and discourse. The privileged usually include owners, executives, the political elite, and even dominant ways of thinking and acting (e.g., masculine rationality). The disadvantaged or oppressed usually include workers, women, minorities, and others who are denied privilege or otherwise discounted in organizational life.

Sometimes the sources of organizational oppression seem to be located in systems of language and meaning. For example, some writers say that sexual discrimination and harassment of women in organizations arise from a language that demeans and debases women (Bosmajian, 1983). In other words, common ways of *talking* about women influence ways of *thinking* about and *acting* toward women.

In other cases, oppression seems to reside in power differences and inequalities that exist in the design of organizational structure. Discrimination against women, for example, is not merely a problem of language, but it is also a problem of physical segregation and isolation from sources of power and information (Crawford, 1977). If a woman is assigned to a “do-nothing” job, or is denied promotion and advancement, or cannot get past the boss’s secretary in order to get an appointment, she faces *structural* barriers to her goals.

Not surprisingly, remedies for sex discrimination appeal to changes in both language and structure, e.g., eliminating sexist language in order to reconstruct symbolic expressions of male dominance and requiring the male-dominated power structure to integrate women into its ranks. But treating oppression as a language problem or a structure problem with palliatives directed at one or the other may miss the true nature of organizational oppression, and this is the point at which the critical perspective has something important to contribute to our understanding of organizations.

At the risk of oversimplification, we might say that critical scholars are concerned at the same time with social structure *and* with symbolic processes. Organizational oppression does not reside in structure alone or in symbols alone. It resides in the *relationship* between structure and symbols.

A good example of the linkage between structure and symbols can be found in Dennis Mumby’s (1987) comments about interpretivism. Mumby, a critical theorist, agrees that

interpretive research “demonstrates that organizational reality is fundamentally symbolic in nature” (p. 120), but he also believes that interpretive research is naïve because “it does little to explicate the deep structure process through which certain organizational realities come to hold sway over competing world-views” (p. 113). In other words, it does little to explain the role of symbols in dominance, oppression, and the privileging of some interests over others.

Why does Mumby make this argument, and what does he mean by *deep structure*? As he explains it, “Domination involves getting people to organize their behavior around a particular rule system” (p. 115). This rule system is the deep structure of the organization. It defines power relationships. Some of the symbolic forms that we find in organizational communication function to “produce, maintain, and reproduce these power structures” (Mumby, p. 113). Consequently, critical scholars often are concerned with discursive practices and the concept of discourse as we described it earlier.

One way in which symbols define power relations is through the systematic distortion of communication (Deetz, 1982). Tompkins and Redding point out that distortion of communication does not mean the same thing to a critical scholar that it might mean to a traditionalist. When traditionalists talk about distortion, they usually are concerned with inaccuracies or errors in information that lead to inefficiency and ineffectiveness in communication. But critical scholars regard distortion as a systematic and deliberate symbolic process through which “the owner/manager’s interests are falsely joined with those of the worker in ideological communication” (Tompkins & Redding, 1988, p. 27).

As you may be expecting by now, we are going to suggest how critical scholars would contribute something to our understanding of Katrina. For example, consider the story of Jason Jackson and the Wal-Mart response to Katrina. It is not our aim here to detract from Wal-Mart’s important contributions during this catastrophe, but Wal-Mart also created media awareness of these contributions. Some media organizations suggested what the corporation itself did not say explicitly, i.e., that Wal-Mart’s superior systems, practices, and people enabled the company to go where others could not (Barbaro & Gillis, 2005).

Featherstone (2005) offered an initial critical commentary directed not at Wal-Mart per se but at media suggestions that Wal-Mart’s Katrina response demonstrated the superiority of the private sector over government. In her own colorful use of language, Featherstone suggests that the language of this lesson on private-sector triumph versus government bungling obscures or simply ignores the consequences of systematically draining essential resources from the government agencies that are supposed to respond in such situations.

Within the company itself, stories of Jason Jackson and the emergency operations center might well become legendary as illustrations of the Wal-Mart way of doing things and the values that are important to the company’s success. But critical scholars want to know whose interests these values really serve. Those of all organization members or primarily those of an elite group or class?

And how about one of the most troubling aspects of the entire Katrina episode, namely, the silences that repeatedly greeted Brian Wolshon’s question a long time before Katrina about hurricane evacuation plans for the tens of thousands of immobile residents of New Orleans? Thomas Huckin may have offered some critical theory clues when he described textual silences in discourse on homelessness in 2002. Huckin discussed five forms of textual elision or silences. As a critical scholar, he was interested primarily in so-called manipulative silences, i.e., silences “that intentionally conceal relevant information from the

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listener or reader, to the advantage of the speaker or writer” (p. 351). Since manipulative silence manipulates only when it goes unnoticed, we doubt that it applies here, but another of Huckin’s silences, namely, speech-act silence, may apply. Unlike manipulative silence, speech-act silence intends something communicative.

Maybe you have heard or even had occasion to use the phrase, “Your silence speaks volumes.” In the case of speech-act silence, the listener is supposed to perceive something informative, and the speaker intends for something informative to be perceived. Now maybe this is in one sense still a form of manipulation because the speaker possesses deniability: “I never said that.” Were Wolshon’s expert planning colleagues saying something through their silence that they also, if necessary, could deny ever having said?

We will have a lot more to say about critical scholarship in various chapters of the book. For now, however, it is only important to know that critical scholarship, as its label implies, criticizes organizational discourse with the goal of consciousness raising and emancipation for oppressed organizational classes.

Feminism

We include feminism here as a special case of the critical perspective because feminist theory and scholarship in organizational communication also is concerned with criticism and emancipation, but feminism is focused first and foremost on the oppression of women and on patriarchy (institutionalized male domination) as the instrument of that oppression. Actually, there are several different versions of feminist theory that differ from each other primarily in their strategies for addressing the problem of patriarchy. For example, Tong (1989) and Iannello (1992) distinguish between liberal and radical feminism. Iannello says that liberal feminism aims at advancing women’s rights and achieving equality by “eliminating patriarchy from the larger institutions that govern society” (p. 39). In liberal feminism, “socially constructed differences between the sexes are the chief source of female oppression” (p. 39).

Radical feminism also asserts that gender roles are socially constructed, but specifically blames “male power” (Iannello, 1992, p. 40) for that construction. Thus, according to Tong, “It is not just patriarchy’s legal and political structures that must be overturned; its social and cultural institutions (especially the family, the church, and the academy) must also go” (p. 3). Under the radical feminist agenda, there is no room for any naïve interpretivist ideas about negotiated order!

Status of the Field

Having considered the major perspectives that have developed in the study of organizational communication, we can now offer an assessment of the field’s present status. We think the status is best reflected in the current influence of each perspective. There are new developments that are shaping the direction of this field in this early part of the 21st century. Rather than address those in summary form here, we have saved them for the book’s last chapter on future directions.

Although there are other ways of categorizing and describing the major perspectives that guide our study of organizational communication, the ones that we have labeled as traditional, interpretive, and critical seem to be the most influential (cf. Tompkins & Redding, 1988, or Miller, 2006). The traditional perspective was for many years the dominant orientation to organizational communication, but interpretive and critical approaches gained adherents very

rapidly in the latter part of the 20th century. The acceptance and influence of these perspectives arose from at least two major sources of dissatisfaction with traditionalism.

First, traditionalism was responsible for the disorganized state of the field in the 1960s and 1970s. Although several major textbooks and articles attempted to assemble the jigsaw puzzle of organizational communication in the 1970s, questions remained about our ability to make sense of our own work. H. Lloyd Goodall, Jr. (1984) concluded from a review of organizational communication research in that era that different studies “read like newspapers from different planets” (p. 135).

Second, some scholars objected that traditionalism is “managerially biased” because it is concerned primarily with work organizations and with the relationships between communication and organizational effectiveness. This bias is compounded because the organizational communication scholar’s audience consists mainly of managers, administrators, professionals, and, of course, college students who plan to enter similar roles. Michael Pacanowsky and Nick O’Donnell-Trujillo summed up this criticism when they argued that traditionalists try “to understand organizations better so that organizations can be made to run better. . . . What has come to count as ‘better organizational function’ are notions with a distinctly managerial flavor” (1982, p. 119).

Although attention to managerial perspectives and problems certainly is not wrong, many interpretivists point out that an exclusive preoccupation with these concerns results in a very narrow definition of our field of study. Much of the day-to-day communication in organizations has relatively little to do with managerial definitions of organizational effectiveness. Managerial processes involve only one slice of the organizational communication pie.

Critics of traditionalism began to turn to interpretive and critical concepts as a way of at least escaping if not correcting the problems that they saw in the traditionalist perspective. Instead of identifying dozens of communication and organizational variables, then explaining their relationships in piecemeal statistical studies, interpretivists concentrate on the communication process of constructing the meanings and frames of reference from which members experience organizational life. Critical theorists concentrate on revealing how symbols and discourse figure into systems of inequality and privileged interests.

Today, it does not appear that any one perspective dominates the study of organizational communication. While critical and feminist scholars are working on problems ranging from gendered organizing (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005) to dysfunctional organizational change efforts (Harrison & Young, 2005), interpretive research is addressing topics such as work-family conflict (Medved, 2004) and successful community building (Barge, 2003). Meanwhile, traditional scholars continue to work on issues such as factors affecting upward influence tactics (Olufowote, Miller, & Wilson, 2005), information adequacy (Rosenfeld, Richman, & May, 2004), and disengagement in workplace relationships (Sias & Perry, 2004). In any case, debates about dominance and validity of perspectives may be pointless. Important contributions to organizational communication scholarship are being made from all three perspectives, and we have tried to reflect these contributions throughout this book.

SUMMARY

Organizations are pervasive in contemporary human experience. Humans organize to get things done, but organization involves more than just accomplishing tasks. They are sites

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of conflict and confusion as well as cooperation and clarity. They exist for many different reasons, and the reasons are not necessarily harmonious. We tend to speak of organizations as if they are containers in which humans act and interact, but an organization is constituted and enacted through the concerted actions of its members. Hence, communication is the essence of organization. Some discourse analysts go even further by treating the organization literally as a set of discursive practices.

The study of organizational communication can be important to you for at least three reasons. It can improve your understanding of organizational life, provide you with an awareness of important communication skills in organizations, and perhaps start you on a path to a career in the field. In order to really appreciate the field, though, you should also know something about its background and the factors that shaped our approach to this book.

Organizational communication is a relatively new field of study. When it began, it borrowed ideas from other social and behavioral sciences in such a way that its focus on communication was unclear. Many critics felt that the new field was fragmented and disorganized. These problems led to at least three different perspectives of organizational communication: traditional, interpretive, and critical. Feminist theory also is included here as a special case of the critical perspective. These perspectives differ in the ways that they study organizational communication and in the assumptions that they make about the nature of organizations. Traditionalism has evolved from an early form into a different contemporary form. Early traditionalism understands organizations as machines and regards communication as a machinelike process. Recent traditionalism sees organizations as living systems and communication as a dynamic, organismic process. Despite these changes in traditionalism, interpretivism and critical theory have developed as serious alternatives to the traditionalist study of organizations. Interpretivists are concerned with the symbolic processes through which organizational reality is socially constructed. Critical theorists are concerned with the relationship between structure and symbolic processes in the efforts to criticize oppression and the systematic distortion of organizational communication.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES

1. What are some examples of common communication episodes in organizations? What do these examples indicate about the importance of communication in organizational life? Try to generate some examples from your own experiences in organizations, then compare them with those of another person.
2. How would you describe the similarities and differences among traditionalist, interpretivist, and critical perspectives of organizational communication?
3. What are some of the reasons that might explain the early dominance of traditionalism in the study of organizational communication?
4. According to the text, there are some questions that traditionalism is not equipped to answer. What do you think some of the questions might be? How could they be answered from other perspectives?
5. As a group exercise in class, find your own recent events such as Hurricane Katrina that offer lessons about organizational communication. Try to describe the event from traditional, interpretive, and critical points of view.

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