

Potential "Sites" for Building Common Ground across Metatheoretical Perspectives on Organizational Communication

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Perhaps like other essayists in this book (see, e.g., Mumby, Chapter 4, this volume) and many among its readers, we initially experienced a mixed reaction to both the premise and the prospective hope of this project: finding common ground across the perspectives that undergird scholarship on organizational communication. To be sure, the potential practical and intellectual merits of finding common ground in organizational communication studies are enormous. The "stridency" surrounding paradigmatic divisiveness noted by Corman in the Introduction to this volume has become tiresome at best, and deeply troubling at worst. Far from strengthening approaches to understanding organizational communication, such diatribes have engendered second-order conflicts that have diverted attention from the subject of our work. From a pragmatic standpoint, it would be less onerous to labor in consort with a "community" of scholars tilling the common ground concerning organizational communication scholarship. From an intellectual standpoint, common ground surrounding shared assumptions, conceptual language, tests of knowledge claims, and a corpus of research findings could be foundational for theory development and communication among scholars in the area.

At the same time, the search for common ground carries with it the

deleterious potential for homogenization, mediocrity, and even wrong-headedness. When common ground becomes *the* (only) ground into which all intellectual footings are sunk, the loss of creativity and critique inherent in the diversity associated with perspectivism is virtually assured. In turn, the potential for an intellectual analog to a "regression to the mean" is highly likely. Thus, we should not take as a given that common ground is preferable or desirable (Mumby, Chapter 4, this volume). In fact, the abandonment or blending of well-developed and defensible—but different—ways of knowing is a possible consequence of the search for such common ground.

Notwithstanding these reservations, the many benefits that might accrue to our research and to our field from "building common ground" noted by the three essayists in this volume encouraged us to respond to the editors' invitation to offer this commentary. It would be easy and delightful to elaborate upon what we take to be especially useful points raised by the essayists (e.g., Miller's response to "straw-person" critiques of functionalism and her effort to reframe post-positivist research in ways that make common ground with interpretivism seem possible; Cheney's heteroglossic analysis of employee participation processes in ways that reveal common ground among perspectives while maintaining the integrity of each; and Mumby's attempt to surmount the problems inhering in oppositional typologies of organizational communication research by situating four "discourses of knowledge" about organizational communication as increasingly transgressive points on a continuum). Similarly, it would be enticing to debate some of what we view to be questionable arguments advanced by these essayists (e.g., Miller's attempt to blend realist and social constructionist ontologies within a post-positivist position; Cheney's well-intended but limited application of the empirical-analytic perspective in his hypothetical investigation of employee participation; and Mumby's tendency to make communication overly problematic and structure underlying problematic in his analysis of "organization" and its fundamentally political character).

However, consistent with the editors' charge of moving beyond individual essayists while also focusing with them "on ways we can accomplish or develop the common ground" described by Miller, Cheney, and Mumby, we identify below four "building sites" for integrating the post-positivist, interpretivist, and critical theory perspectives: integration across micro- and macrolevels of analysis, (meta)theoretical integration, integration in *applications* of organizational communication research, and the *pragmatics* of integration. We treat each as a "site" for forging integration, a space in which common ground might be "built." By doing so, we hope to highlight the potential for synthesis across perspectives, while keeping sight of the unique utility offered by each.

MICRO-/MACROLEVEL INTEGRATION

One of the fault lines underlying the surface of the social sciences has been the constant tension surrounding the *level of analysis* at which explanation and understanding are to be found. In simplest form this has been reflected in the opposition of perspectives that privilege individual agency and those that emphasize collectives. Indeed, Alexander and Giesen (1987) read the history of sociological theory through the lens of this micro/macro debate. Social theories can be contrasted in terms of the emphasis they place on whether societies emerge from the unfettered interactions of individuals, or whether fully "socialized" actors map social structures into their interactions.

In many respects this micro/macro tension underlies prominent differences associated with post-positivist, interpretivist, and critical theory approaches to organizational communication. Flowing from positivists' atomistic explanations for natural phenomena, organizational scholars steeped in that tradition have most often fostered microlevel accounts of organizational communication "variables" and their relationships. On the other hand, organizational communication scholars working from a critical theory perspective have drawn on the work of Marx, among the most important macroperspectives in the social sciences, for the ascendancy it accords to collective material conditions in the instantiation of individual action.

Of course, there have been notable exceptions in each approach to the study of organizational communication, as with "macro" researchers working within the empirical-analytic tradition and focusing on inter-organizational communication phenomena (see, e.g., Monge et al., 1998) or critical theorists' more microlevel depictions of patterns of power reflected in organizational meetings and narratives (Mumby, 1987). And while scholars working in the interpretivist perspective have produced microlevel ethnographically oriented research for the most part, others have integrated micro- and macroperspectives (e.g., critical feminist research by Buzzanell, 1994, and Clair, 1993, among others). Still, the general effect of these micro/macro predispositions has been to create differences in the level of analysis at which scholars in the respective perspectives work.

One site for building common ground, therefore, is enhanced micro/macro integration in organizational communication scholarship. Several strategies are available. First, when possible and when appropriate, design and conduct studies in ways that self-consciously integrate all three perspectives (as with Cheney's illustration involving analysis of employee participation processes; Chapter 2, this volume). This would not only foster broader and more penetrating insights into the foci of investigation, but would begin to reduce the distances among these perspectives.

Second, and relatedly, perform mesolevel analyses (Rousseau & House, 1994) in ways that examine interactions within and across micro- and macrolevels that bear on the phenomena of interest. For example, Waldeck and Seibold (1998) utilized a mesolevel analysis to examine individual, work group, and organizational needs that affect socialization dynamics, as well as contingent factors that moderate the relationship between these needs and a variety of traditionally studied outcomes of socialization. The mesolevel analysis required broadening what began as a review of post-positivist research to include studies borne of the interpretivist and critical theory perspectives that addressed contingencies at more complex levels of analysis.

Third, frame research "agendas" for organizational communication scholars in ways that link micro to macro. Mumby and Stohl's (1996) "problematics" of voice, rationality, organization, and the organization-environment relationship frame key issues ranging from the micro- to the macrolevel. This serves to emphasize the interrelatedness of organizational members' actions, researchers' agendas, and environmental pressures and invites the application of multiple perspectives in order to address the key issues raised.

Fourth, focus research attention on "mediating structures" in organizational communication—the effect of which would be to require more broad-based analyses. For example, some scholars (Poole, 1998; Seibold, 1998; Weick, 1979) have called for greater attention to organizational groups (e.g., work groups, cross-functional teams, short-term project groups, task forces, executive/administrative groups, committees, and the like) as action/structures that mediate individuals and larger collectives. Groups are at the nexus of individual interaction and organizational structure. They have pervasive effects that channel individual agency, yet mediate larger organizational (even societal) structures in processes that constrain individual members. Parallel claims have been made for the salience of examining "discursive fields" that not only are manifested within organizations but that extend beyond the site of organization, such as Cheney's (1998) analysis of how marketing metaphors not only inform the discourses of business practice but pervade intraorganizational life at multiple levels. Not only do such analyses enjoin both micro- and macroanalyses, but they can conjoin the three perspectives in organizational communication when those approaches proffer the best understandings at different levels of analysis.

(META)THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

Another "site" for building common ground across diverse approaches to organizational communication is the development of theories and meta-

theories that have the potential to integrate scholars from different perspectives. Much as the theories of Weber and Parsons in sociology formed a basis for some connection between adherents to macrostructure (theorists such as Durkheim and Marx) and proponents of microexperiences (theorists such as Mead and Cooley), perspectives that foster (meta)theoretical integration in organizational communication are possible. Such metatheoretical integration might form the basis for paradigm-crossing techniques (see Cheney, Chapter 2, this volume).

One such perspective, as Miller (Chapter 3, this volume) emphasizes, is Giddens's (1984) structuration theory. Giddens locates both the daily "systems" of individuals we observe and the "structures" of society we theorize as emerging from the interpretations of those engaged in interaction. Even as interactants retrospectively assign meaning to the practices in which they are immersed, they produce patterns of larger institutional forms. Society is not only produced and reproduced in this way, but structures of power are developed, meanings are legitimated, and norms are sanctioned. At the same time structuration theory has found application in the work of organizational communication scholars identified with the post-positivist perspective (see, e.g., Poole & DeSanctis, 1992; Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1996; Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998), it has its roots in some of the same phenomenological and structuralism soils that gave rise to interpretivism (see Taylor, Flanagin, Cheney, & Seibold, 2000). This perhaps helps to explain its widespread appeal to communication scholars and its continued potential for building common ground between perspectives.

There are other (meta)theoretical perspectives with the potential to integrate organizational communication scholars. For example, Taylor and Van Every (2000) draw upon developments in artificial intelligence, especially "subsymbolic knowledge" (a property of the network of interaction rather than of any node within it), to develop a perspective on organizational "distributed cognition" that is at once consistent with the work of some conversation analysts who work within the interpretivist perspective and with the work of "semantic network" analysts associated with the post-positivist approach. Alternately, drawing on activity theory, Engeström (1990; Engeström & Middleton, 1996) has highlighted how the material bases of communication in organizational tasks, contexts, and as mediated by technologies are discursively manifested in members' interactions in ways that presage organizational change—a perspective readily relevant for scholars from all three perspectives. Furthermore, Cooren (1999) uses Greimas' sociosemiotic model to self-consciously and explicitly "bridge the gap that traditionally separates functionalism and interpretivism by concentrating on the organizing properties of communication" (p. 294).

Finally, we should neither ignore nor underestimate the potential for work emanating from self-organizing systems theory (Contractor, 1994, 1999; Hawes, 1999; Houston, 1999; Krippendorff, 1999) to forge com-

mon ground among organizational communication scholars. Research on the "self-organizing processes" and generative mechanisms of various social systems can be enriched by invoking multiple metatheoretical perspectives. For example, computational modeling techniques (Carley & Prietula, 1994; Hyatt, Contractor, & Jones, 1997), employed to simulate multiple, nonlinear generative mechanisms in organizations, must be validated against additional data and observations. In this pursuit, and in order to ensure that the researcher is not too far removed from his or her subjects (see Cheney, Chapter 2, this volume), interpretive perspectives may prove valuable in assessing the reasonableness of simulated models by comparing interactants' experiences to proposed patterns of interaction. Moreover, a critical view can be employed to contextualize the wider implications of modeled behavior. Thus, multiple perspectives can profitably be engaged to probe the boundary conditions that serve to define and maintain generative mechanisms in self-organizing processes.

INTEGRATION IN APPLICATION

Perhaps one of the most pervasive and appropriate "sites" for building common ground across organizational communication perspectives is the "world" in which we find ourselves. We are partners and parents, neighbors and citizens, volunteers and voters, community activists and consultants—even as we are academic researchers. In these myriad roles we encounter multiple opportunities for seeding, conducting, or applying "research." As Cheney (Chapter 2, this volume) notes, "research is understood to be part of the larger stream or *durée* of life. What becomes research is not always known at the outset of what might later be termed 'a project.' And what may be identified as a research project ought to flow naturally back into other life activities" (p. 20).

The blurring of boundaries concerning potential foci and contexts for research are dynamics central to the interpretivist and critical theory perspectives. Moreover, this notion is not inconsistent with post-positivism, especially as the assumption of value-free inquiry has been rejected and as objectivity has come to be seen as a "regulatory ideal" rather than as an absolute and attainable requirement (Miller, Chapter 3, this volume). The organizational communication research literature is replete with empirical-analytical studies rooted in contract-driven applied research projects, needs assessments, formative evaluations, policy analyses, and summative research, among others. In most cases, these were not "basic" research but investigations that employed organizational theory and research methods as means toward applied ends, and whose theoretical implications were realized and reported upon in the process of serving those applied ends.

To draw upon a personal example, in an article published in the *Amer-*

ican Journal of Hospice Care, Seibold, Rossi, Berteotti, Soprych, and McQuillan (1987) reported an evaluation of a hospice volunteer program. While we necessarily and inevitably drew upon major research constructs and findings as ways of framing the context and the problem (volunteer turnover), we did not begin with the goal of addressing or advancing this literature. Rather, this research served as a basis for interpreting why the volunteer program succeeded in retaining some volunteers while losing what hospice administrators regarded as too many others. We did not set out to test postulates about the effects of "role conflict" on organizational turnover, for instance, but simply drew upon what insights organizational theory afforded us (which we later reported elsewhere; see Berteotti & Seibold, 1994) as a means to answer a specific question about a specific problem in a specific setting.

As the recursivity of *theoria* and *praxis*, of research ends and means, and even of one's life and one's research become more apparent, the opportunities increase for building common ground across perspectives in organizational communication. As researcher-citizens investigate and seek to ameliorate problems of participation and voice, efficacy and influence, inequity and marginalization, productivity and performance, oppression and powerlessness, intergroup conflict, misunderstandings, and quality of work life, among many others, the axiological, ontological, and epistemological assumptions of each perspective offer alternative frames of understanding. In turn, the research methods attendant to alternative perspectives afford different means for attaining insights. Where appropriate, multimethodism borne of each perspective can offer further explanatory traction. If Cheney's (Chapter 2, this volume) depiction of each perspective's approach to studying employee participation processes is not viewed as separate and sequential, but as simultaneous and seamless, the potential for another "building site" of common ground is apparent in the "application" of all three perspectives.

PRAGMATICS OF INTEGRATION

In the final analysis, building common ground across perspectives in organizational communication will require not only collective determination concerning how we enact our field but also individual integrity related to how we enact our roles as scholars. In the first area, the field, the very fora in which divisiveness, claims of incommensurability, and even name calling are heard, can just as readily be converted to venues for establishing common ground. Each academic year there are myriad opportunities to build "institutional sites" explicitly devoted to integration across perspectives: entire volumes like this one; integrative sections, chapters, or commentaries in edited volumes; special issues of journals or colloquy sections on a rou-

tine basis; preconferences, seminars, and panels at our professional society meetings; exchanges on CRTNET; visiting lecture series at host universities (with subsequent publication of proceedings); and collaborative research ventures—among others. The more that such “sites” are routinely and ritualistically used for addressing prospects and problems attendant to building common ground, the less guarded we all may become about the need for the same.

But individual agency must play a crucial role if there is to be common ground for all. As Cheney (Chapter 2, this volume) notes concerning the foundations of incommensurability, “in some cases researchers do not even reach the point of articulating a principle such as incommensurability because either (1) they are not fully aware of competing perspectives (by holding caricatures of them) or (2) they simply do not recognize the competing claims that originate from outside their own strongly held ideology as valid” (p. 38). However, as Miller (Chapter 3, this volume) notes, actions as simple as *talking* to each other might reduce perceived incommensurability across perspectives. Disciplining ourselves to read research literature from other perspectives, to integrate that literature into our syllabi, and to ponder differences fairly (and to refrain from using the caricatures that obscure them) are crucial acts within each scholar’s prerogative.

In essence, we must think of ourselves as “individual sites” for potential integration. By doing so, we might “abandon the binary” contrasts set up to validate perspectives, thereby transcending false oppositions and halting their reification (see Mumby, Chapter 4, this volume). Furthermore, we may also begin to “rescue from vilification” each individual perspective and avoid caricaturing one another’s primary metatheoretical emphases (Miller, Chapter 3, this volume). Ultimately, then, finding whatever common ground is available in organizational communication across the post-positivist, interpretivist, and critical theory perspectives requires *each* of us to perform simple, everyday acts of courage.

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